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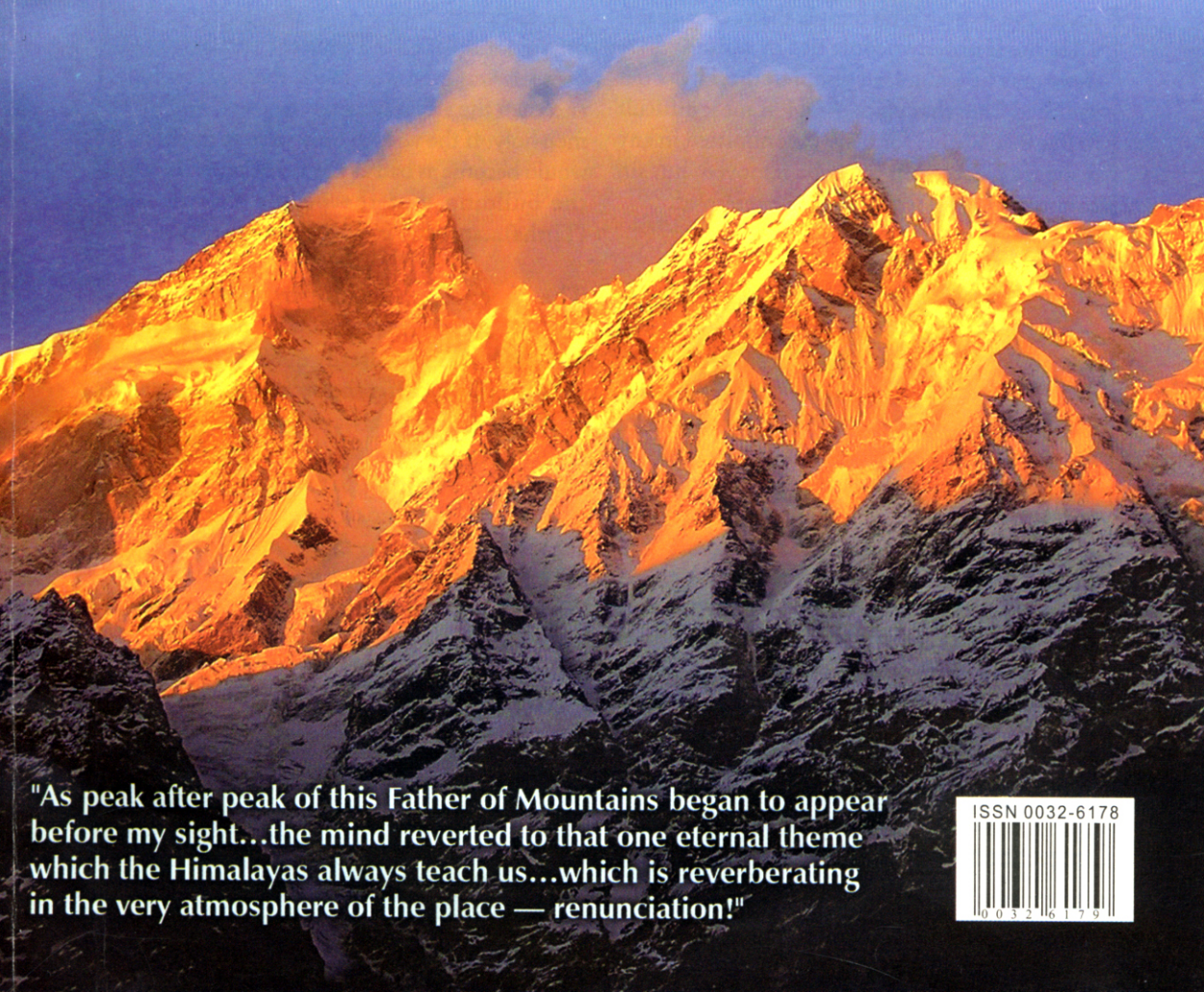


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# PRABUDDHA BHARATA

or AWAKENED INDIA

A Monthly Journal of the Ramakrishna Order  
Started by Swami Vivekananda in 1896



"As peak after peak of this Father of Mountains began to appear before my sight...the mind reverted to that one eternal theme which the Himalayas always teach us...which is reverberating in the very atmosphere of the place — renunciation!"

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JULY 2006

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Editorial Office:  
Prabuddha Bharata  
**Advaita Ashrama**  
P.O. Mayavati, Via. Lohaghat  
Dt. Champawat-262 524  
Uttaranchal, India  
E-mail: [awakened@rediffmail.com](mailto:awakened@rediffmail.com)

Publication Office:  
**Advaita Ashrama**  
5 Dehi Entally Road, Kolkata-700014  
Phs: 91• 33 • 22440898 / 22452383 /  
22164000/ 22450050  
E-mail: [advaita@vsnl.com](mailto:advaita@vsnl.com) &  
[mail@advaitaashrama.org](mailto:mail@advaitaashrama.org)

Cover: Sunset over the Garhwal range, Himalayas, with Swami Vivekananda's quotation in the foreground.

उत्तिष्ठत  
जाग्रत  
प्राप्य  
वरान्निबोधत ।

# PRABUDDHA BHARATA

Arise! Awake! And stop not till the goal is reached!

Vol. 111

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No. 7

## Traditional Wisdom

*TĪRTHA*: SACRED LOCALE

यज्ञो हि ष्मेन्द्रं कश्चिद्वृन्धञ्जुहुराणश्चिन्मनसा परियन् ।  
तीर्थे नाच्छा तातृषाणमोको दीर्घो न सिध्ममा कृणोत्यध्वा ॥

One man propitiates Indra, augmenting (his vigour) by sacrifice; another, who is insincere, worships (him) with mind averted (to worldly thoughts); (to the first) he is like the lake at the *tīrtha* to a thirsty (pilgrim), (to the other) like a long road which retards the end (of the journey). (Rig Veda, 1.173.11)

अघायि धीतिरससृग्रमंशास्तीर्थे न दस्ममुप यन्त्यूमाः ।  
अभ्यानश्म सुवितस्य शूषं नवेदसो अमृतानामभूम ॥

The sacrifice is prepared, poured are the allotted oblations: as to a *tīrtha* come the devout unto the Wondrous (Divine). May we obtain the happiness of heaven, may we become acquainted with immortals. (10.32.3)

समुद्रो वा एष सर्वहरो यदहोरात्रे तस्य हैते अगाधे तीर्थे यत्सन्ध्ये ।

Day and night are the sea that absorbs everything and the twilights are the unfathomable *tīrthas* (of this sea). (*Shankhayana Brahmana*, 2.9)

यथा शरीरस्योद्देशाः केचिन्मेध्यतमाः स्मृताः । तथा पृथिव्या उद्देशाः केचित्पुण्यतमाः स्मृताः ॥  
प्रभावाद्भुताद्भूमेः सलिलस्य च तेजसा । परिग्रहान्मुनीनां च तीर्थानां पुण्यता स्मृता ॥

Just as some parts of the human body (e.g. the right hand or ear) are held to be purer (than others), so some localities on the earth are held to be holier than others. *Tīrthas* are held to be holy on account of some wonderful natural characteristic of the locality or on account of the unique grandeur of the local waters or on account of the fact that some sage resorted to them (for austerity). (*Skanda Purana*, 4.6.43-4)

Gods and sages do come to bathe at Triveni (Allahabad). ... If they do not come, the place can no longer be considered a *tīrtha*. (Swami Vijnanananda)

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## ∞ This Month ∞

Places of pilgrimage have proved to be some of the most enduring locations of culture and human discourse. We take a look at some of the reasons for their appeal in this and the next issue beginning with *Tirtha: Sacred Geography*.

**Prabuddha Bharata—100 Years Ago** focuses on the diverse aspects of ‘The Religious Instinct’ as an existential reality.

As the place of Sri Ramakrishna’s sadhanas and the origin of his spiritual ministry, Dakshineswar is of central importance to the devotees of the Ramakrishna Order. Swami Chetanandaji, Minister-in-Charge, Vedanta Society of St Louis, captures the magic of the place and some of its numerous spiritual associations in *Dakshineswar: The Stage for Ramakrishna’s Divine Play*.

**Ujjayini: The Centre of Cosmic Rhythm, and the Simhashta Festival of 2004** is an insightful account of the reasons why Ujjain was at the centre of ancient India, geographically as well as culturally. It also presents a brief view of the most recent of Kumbha Melas. The author, Dr Mohan Gupta, is former Divisional Commissioner, Ujjain.

*Lila-chintana* as a spiritual discipline has reached sophisticated heights in the Vaishnava tradition; and Vraja, the scene of Krishna’s sport, is at the heart of this tradition. In *the Vrindavan of My Heart* is a pen picture of the meaning of Vrindavan for devotees of Krishna by Swami Achyutanandaji of Ramakrishna Math, Belur. This adapted translation of the author’s original Bengali text, *Hridi Brindabane*, has been provided by Dr Chhaya Ghosh, Durgapur.

Spread across the entire Indian subcontinent and intimately connected with local cultures and traditions, the fifty-one *devipithas* are an enduring metaphor for the religious and cultural unity of the subcontinent. Swami Chidrupanandaji, Ramakrishna Mission Institute of Culture, Kolkata, visits the twelve *pithas* located in West Bengal to bring us a fascinating panorama: **In Search of the Divine: An Account of the Twelve Shaktipithas of West Bengal**.

The story of ancient South-East Asia, the *suvarnabhumi* of Indian fable, is the story of Indian colonization. But the Hindu-Buddhist culture that took root in these parts developed its own distinct flavour reflected in the art and architecture of places like Angkor Wat. In *The Magic of Angkor*, Dr Saibal Gupta takes a fresh look at the place and its history. The author, a reputed cardiovascular surgeon of Kolkata, has a special interest in Indian history and culture.

Scenic beauty has been especially associated with pilgrimage sites in India. But there are numerous secular tourist resorts across the globe which evoke mystic feelings in sensitive tourists. **Alaska! More than a Dream, So Close to Reality, and Yet So Unique** is one such account of the mystical elements embedded in nature. The author Smt. Pritha Lal, is Organizational Behaviour Specialist, Nu Skin Enterprises, Provo, Utah.

Dr M Sivaramkrishna, former Head, Department of English, Osmania University, Hyderabad, continues his exploration of **The Many-splendoured Ramakrishna-Vivekananda Vedanta** in diverse contemporary literary texts across the globe.



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# *Tīrtha*: Sacred Geography

## EDITORIAL

**T**he Taj Mahal is one of the most widely publicized tourist attractions of India. But nearby Mathura and Vrindavan get more visitors every year. A whole host of socio-political issues mobilize vast concourses of people. However, the Kumbha Mela remains the largest human gathering on record. Numerous posh metropolises have been springing up across the globe in the wake of the economic boom. Yet ancient Varanasi retains that unique charm of which Swami Vivekananda had this to say: 'Brother, does it not make you pause and think of the marvellous attraction of this wonderful place of preparation for final rest? Does it not strike you with a mysterious sense of awe—this age-old and never-ending stream of pilgrims marching to salvation through death?'

### Creative Beauty

What makes for the appeal of *tīrthas*, the holy sites of pilgrimage? Sister Nivedita observed: 'It is certain that behind [the] sanctity of pilgrimage lies admiration of place, of art, even of geographical significance. Benares in the North and Conjeeveram in the South, are loved and visited in India for the same reason as Durham or Cologne amongst ourselves. They are cathedral cities, rich in architecture, in treasure, and in the association of saints and scholars. Jagannath is placed where it is, for the sheer beauty of the sea, and perhaps a little also for the old cosmopolitan grandeur of the port through which flowed the Eastern trade. Allahabad is sacred, because there two mighty rivers join their waters, making her the strategic key to two vast basins, inhabited by different races, with diverse traditions, hopes and folk-lore. It is the solemn beauty of the Himalayas that make them the refuge of holy men.'

Natural beauty, however, has evoked a

singularly distinct response from the Indian mind, says Sister Nivedita: 'Beauty of place translates itself to the Indian consciousness as God's cry to the soul. Had Niagara been situated on the Ganges, it is odd to think how different would have been its valuation by humanity. Instead of fashionable picnics and railway pleasure-trips, the yearly or monthly incursion of worshipping crowds. Instead of hotels, temples. Instead of ostentatious excess, austerity. Instead of the desire to harness its mighty forces to the chariot of human utility, the unrestrainable longing to throw away the body, and realize at once the ecstatic madness of Supreme Union.'

If nature is a work of art, God is a unique artist. According to Ananda Coomaraswamy: 'That God is the first artist does not mean He created forms, which might not have been lovely had the hand of the potter slipped, but that every natural object is an immediate realization of His being. This creative activity is comparable with aesthetic expression in its non-volitional character; no element of choice enters into that world of imagination and eternity, but there is perfect identity of intuition-expression, soul and body.'

If the universe is an expression of the imaginative creativity of the Divine, then human myths and legends are attempts to capture that imagination within that very creation. 'The *tīrthas*', writes Diana Eck, 'are primarily associated with the great acts and appearances of the gods and the heroes of Indian myth and legend. As a threshold between heaven and earth, the *tīrtha* is not only a place for the "upward" crossings of people's prayers and rites, it is also a place for the "downward" crossings of the gods. ... Considering this vast corpus of Indian mythology, which recounts the deeds of the gods and heroes, it is not difficult to imagine that the

whole of India's geography is engraved with traces of mythic events. It is a living sacred geography.' The seven 'liberating cities', the fifty-one *devīpīthas*, the twelve *jyotirlingas*, the seven great rivers, the five Kedars and Kashis, the seven Badris, the five *sarovaras* (lakes), the twenty-four *prayāgas* (river confluences), the innumerable sites associated with the legends of the Ramayana and Mahabharata, ... the list is endless.

### Internalizing the Legend

'In Hinduism, pilgrimage is often the process of learning to see the underlying or implicit spiritual structure of the land', notes David Kinsley; 'this often involves a change in perspective, a change that is religiously transformative. Pilgrimage is the process whereby pilgrims open themselves to the sacred power, the numinous quality, of the landscape, whereby they establish a rapport with the land that is spiritually empowering. ... The physical immediacy of pilgrimage, the actual contact with the land, intensifies the experience of appropriating the story of the land, learning to see its underlying, implicit structure, sensing its spiritually enlivening power. The experience can be lasting, transforming one's perspective permanently.'

This process of spiritual transformation, more often than not, is a long-drawn process; and holy associations and remembrances aid this change. Sri Ramakrishna taught his devotees that 'just as cows eat their fill, become free from anxiety, and then resting in one place, chew the cud, so after one has visited temples and pilgrim centres, one should sit in a secluded place, and ruminate over and get absorbed in those holy thoughts that occurred to one in these sacred places'.

Madhusudana Saraswati points out that when the mind 'liquefied' by higher emotions flows steadily towards the Supreme, then that mental modification is termed bhakti: *drutasya bhagavadharmād-dhārāvāhikatām gata; sarv-ēse manaso vṛttirbhaktirityabhidhīyate*. These divine emotions are generated and fostered by hearing about God, living at holy places and as-

sociating with holy persons—that is by resorting to *tīrthas* (skilled instructors, holy places and holy persons are all signified by the term *tīrtha*). If the thought of the Divine is the primary or substantial determinant (*ālambana vibhāva*) of bhakti, then the places of pilgrimage and its associations act as enhancers of or physical stimulants (*uddīpana vibhāva*) to the generation of bhakti.

### Realizing the Divine

So *tīrtha yātrā* (pilgrimage) is much more than religious sightseeing. Undertaken as part of the prescribed devotional discipline (*vaidhī bhakti*) it kindles in the receptive heart the flame of bhakti, which is then stoked by the spiritual aspirant's yearning and spontaneous devotional moods (*rāgānugā bhakti*) into the full-fledged conflagration of higher devotion called *bhāva bhakti* or *premā bhakti*.

In the Vaishnava tradition *rāgānugā bhakti* consists of 'an emotional sublimation of intimate human sentiments towards Krishna, in terms of the intimate devotional sentiments displayed in different personal relationships (as that of a son, relative, lover, friend, servant and so forth) between the deity and His dear ones in His eternal sport at Vraja. It is thus an ecstasy of vicarious enjoyment.' The devotee 'prepares himself for it by imitating and realizing within himself the different aspects of the beatific sports'. If the sacred *tīrthas* are physical reminders of divine lila, then the sadhakas internalize these *tīrthas* and recreate them on the stages of their own hearts (the 'Vrindavan of their hearts'). They live in the company of their beloved deity through perpetual acts of love and service till the distinction between the external *tīrthas* and their inner representations is wiped out. In that state of divinized emotion (*bhāva*) Sri Ramakrishna could actually visualize the 'Golden Kashi' with Shiva granting liberation, and see the perpetual sport of Krishna which led him to affirm that 'Krishna is Spirit embodied, and His Abode also is Spirit embodied'. Krishna is eternal, so are His devotees. \*

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# Prabuddha Bharata—100 Years Ago

July 1906

## The Religious Instinct

In every nation, in myriads of aeons, under every sky, so far as we can trace from the beginning, men have paid homage to a god or gods in some form or other, and this instinct has been passed on through innumerable generations, swaying the feelings of mankind, and especially of individuals. But it is uncertain when religious conceptions were first framed. The Rig-veda is considered to be the oldest literary document in existence, and contains the original conception of God. ... At the time of its production, the worship represented in the great number of hymns, is that of natural objects—Indra, the cloudless firmament; the Maruts, the winds; Ushas, the dawn; Vishnu, Surya, Agni, and a host of lesser deities. ...

The uniform testimony of history proves the religious instinct of mankind to develop itself in many directions, and farther examination shows that while one nation sought its gods in the powers of nature, others developed animal, ghost, fetish, ancestor, and hero-worship, followed later on by symbolism, oracles, secret doctrines or mysteries. Animal sacrifice, and the belief in immortality were more or less common at all times.

There were some who thought of cultivating elevated and devout feelings by the aid of the fine arts. No doubt beauty has an element of infinity which we catch through the medium of form, colour, rhythm, or harmony, but it is nebulous and vague, and though religion may spring from art, it finally emancipates itself from it. ...

Agas rolled on before the old gods were out-grown and superseded by spiritual ideas and ethical influences, In the slow march of the centuries, the idea regarding religion as purely a matter of revelation crept in, and the religious impulse was marked by ever-varying superstitions. ...

The assumption that there can be only one true religion, rests on the belief of the unity of God. If there is but one God, He must stand in the same relation towards all nations of men, and all existence. An inspired book is only to us what we see it to mean: for no words can convey exactly similar ideas to all classes of minds, and so cannot carry the same message to everyone. Has the fecundity of thought been exhausted? Can the world become bankrupt of spiritual experience? We answer, 'No, it is always one and the same God that gives the light in every age.' ...

We find that one of the profoundest influences of humanity is religious inspiration: a divine afflatus controlling the soul. It is essentially intermittent, but hallowed whispers and foregleams come to the man who is spiritually adjusted. The resulting echo will be determined, not altogether by the illuminating potency, but by the capacity for expression of the instrument that is striving to attune itself to the Infinite. ...

It seems that man in the lowest stage of his spiritual development, identifies himself with the gross body; in the following stage, with the vital powers; next, with the seat of sensations; subsequently with the intellect, and ultimately, with the unchangeable Essence, God Himself. We see that this inherent consciousness is an attitude of the soul; an effort of the mind, heart, and spirit of the race to get into right relations with the Omniscient. ... Blessed are they who find the entrance into the Presence chamber of the Infinite, the Holy of Holies, and participate in the beatitude of the One absolute.

—Advaitin

# Dakshineswar: The Stage for Ramakrishna's Divine Play

SWAMI CHETANANANDA

It is extremely important for the reader to know the history of the surroundings in which Ramakrishna enacted his divine drama for thirty years. The Dakshineswar Kali temple was built by Rani Rasmani, a wealthy woman of Calcutta. In 1847 she had planned a pilgrimage to Varanasi. The night before her departure, the Divine Mother appeared to her in a dream and said: 'You need not go to Varanasi. Install my image in a beautiful spot along the bank of the Ganges and arrange for my worship and offerings to Me. I will manifest Myself within that image and accept your worship every day.'<sup>1</sup>

Rani Rasmani bought a piece of land in Dakshineswar, a few miles north of Calcutta, and over the next eight years built a huge temple complex there. She spent an enormous amount of money to complete the temple and install its deities. Rasmani's design was unusual in that she included temples to Kali, Radha-Krishna, and Shiva all in the same compound. Generally, Kali and Shiva temples are built side by side but a temple to Krishna is traditionally not included in the same compound. Perhaps Rasmani was intuitively following a divine plan: in the future Ramakrishna would come to the temple complex and practise different religious paths, demonstrating the harmony of re-

ligions. On 31 May 1855 Ramkumar, Ramakrishna's elder brother, officiated over the dedication ceremony of the temple; Ramakrishna was also present on that occasion.

Sister Nivedita wrote: 'Humanly speaking, without the Temple of Dakshineswar there had [*sic*] been no Ramakrishna; without Ramakrishna, no Vivekananda; and without Vivekananda, no Western mission [of Vedanta].'<sup>2</sup>

In the eyes of devotees, Ramakrishna is still in Dakshineswar and Dakshineswar is still as it was in the 1880s. Of course, due to the

passing of time some changes have taken place in the temple garden. The temples have deteriorated; most of the trees that grew during the Master's time are now dead; and crowds of pilgrims have overrun the formerly peaceful garden. Such changes are inevitable. We are

thankful to M (Mahendra Nath Gupta) for the vivid description of the temple garden that he included in the first part of *Sri Sri Ramakrishna Kathamrita (The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna)*. The description is in the Bengali version of the *Gospel*. I translated it in full in *Ramakrishna as We Saw Him* (Vedanta Society of St Louis, 1990); in this chapter I shall present some excerpts from this description. M begins:

It is Sunday. The devotees have the day off, so they come in large numbers to the temple garden



*The Bhavatarini temple flanked by the Radhakanta temple and the natmandir*



to visit Sri Ramakrishna. His door is open to everybody, and he talks freely with all, irrespective of caste or creed, sect or age. His visitors are monks, paramahansas [illuminated souls], Hindus, Christians, Brahmans, the followers of Shakti and Vishnu, men and women. Blessed was Rani Rasmani! She, out of her religious disposition, built this beautiful temple garden and brought Sri Ramakrishna, the embodiment of divinity, to this place. She made it possible for people to see and worship this God-man.<sup>3</sup>

With these words M invites suffering humanity to relax in the blissful abode of the Dakshineswar temple garden and listen to the immortal message of Ramakrishna. His intention was to imprint the setting of the temple garden in the minds of the audience before he presented the drama.

When one visits a holy place and worships the deities there, one's mind is purified and one then develops longing to hear more about God. M says:

According to the scriptures, one should circumambulate a holy place at least three times because that makes an indelible impression on the mind of the pilgrim. But once is enough for those who have a good memory and a strong power of observation.

What should one do in a holy place? First, drink a little of the deity's sanctified water. Second, sit in front of the deity for a while. Third, sing or chant the glories of God. Fourth, feed the holy people. Fifth, bring some fruits and sweets to offer. Sixth, don't be stingy or cheat anybody.<sup>4</sup>

In the sixteen volumes of *Srima Darshan*, Swami Nityatmananda has recorded conversations with M and many of his memories of the Master that are not in the *Gospel*. In this chapter, I shall translate some of this material into English for the first time.

We spend our money, time, and energy in order to visit a holy or historical place. We hire a guide who explains the importance of that place, for otherwise our trip would be meaningless. After Ramakrishna's passing away, M took many people to Dakshineswar and acted as their guide.

In the eyes of a lover, everything related to the beloved is sweet and precious. M tried to imprint his experiences with the Master on the minds of his visitors, thus giving them a taste of the divine bliss that M had enjoyed.

### The Chandni (Porch)

The Dakshineswar Kali temple is on the Ganga, five miles north of Kolkata. One can travel by boat to Dakshineswar and disembark at the chandni ghat to enter the temple complex. One is supposed to purify oneself with Ganga water before visiting the deities. It was here at the chandni ghat that Ramakrishna would bathe. After Ramakrishna's passing,



*The chandni ghat*

when M visited Dakshineswar, he would come to this ghat and soak a towel in the water of the Ganga. When he returned home he would squeeze the towel and sprinkle that water on his visitors, reminding them that this water came from the spot where the Master used to bathe. Swami Nityatmananda writes: 'M reached the chandni ghat. He sat on the second step from the top and four yards from the north. He said: "The Master sat here when Keshab Sen and his followers came"' (6.90). The Master sat on this ghat as if he were a ferryman waiting for passengers who sincerely wanted to cross the turbulent ocean of maya.

### Bhavatarini Kali

M describes the image in the Kali temple at Dakshineswar:

South of the Krishna temple is the Kali temple. The beautiful image of the Divine Mother is made out of black stone and her name is 'Bhavatarini,' or the Saviour of the World. The floor of this temple is paved with white and black marble. A high altar, with steps to the south, is also made out of stone. Above this is a thousand-petalled lotus made of silver, on which Lord Shiva is lying, with his head to the south and feet to the north. The image of Shiva is made of white marble. On his chest stands the beautiful three-eyed image of Mother Kali, wearing a Varanasi silk sari and various ornaments.<sup>5</sup>



*Bhavatarini Kali*

The height of the image is 33½ inches. M later says about this image: 'The Master told us that the sculptor of this image was Navin [Pal]. He would work on the image the whole day and eat one vegetarian meal at 3:00 p.m. He undertook severe austerities to make that image of Kali in Dakshineswar. That is the reason the image looks so alive. As the sculptor's heart was full of devotion, his hands transmitted that feeling to the stone image.'<sup>6</sup> There are many Kali images in Bengal, but the image in Dakshineswar is special because the Master invoked the deity within it. He checked to see if the Mother was alive by holding cotton near Her nostrils; as he did this, he saw Mother breathing.

The image of Kali is much misunderstood by Western people, who think She is terrible and frightening. Kali is the Shakti, or the power of Brahman by which He creates, preserves, and dissolves the universe. She is the Cosmic Energy and manifests in both benign and destructive ways. She is the Divine Mother who loves all beings because all are Her children.

Kali's deep blue complexion represents the infinite; each hair is a jiva, or individual soul. Her three eyes symbolize her knowledge

of past, present, and future. Her white teeth symbolize sattva (peace); Her red tongue, rajas (activity). The protruding tongue between the teeth reminds the viewer that one controls restlessness with calmness. Her necklace consists of fifty skulls, symbolic of the fifty letters of the Sanskrit alphabet, the origin of sound. Her upper-right hand grants fearlessness as Her lower-right hand offers boons. She cuts human bondage with the sword in Her upper-left hand and imparts wisdom with the lower-left

one, which holds a severed head. She is infinite, so She is naked, clad in space. Shiva is cosmic consciousness and Kali is cosmic energy; Shiva lies on His back beneath Kali's feet. No creation is possible without their union.

During his second visit to Dakshineswar, M raised a question about the 'clay' image of Kali, and Ramakrishna told him, 'It is an image of Spirit.' He further explained that God is both formless and with form, like water and ice.

### The Terrace

There is a terrace between the steps of the Kali temple and the natmandir (prayer hall). 'Sometimes the Master used to sit here alone or with the devotees facing the Mother not far from the edge of the natmandir', writes M. One day Ramakrishna dedicated M to the Divine Mother by singing this song:

Thy name, I have heard,  
O Consort of Shiva,  
is the destroyer of our fear,  
And so on Thee I cast my burden:  
Save me! Save me! O kindly Mother! (12.175).

Another day the Master was seated on the terrace, close to the eastern column of the natmandir, when he prayed: 'Mother, I don't want any physical enjoyment; Mother, I don't

want name and fame; Mother, I don't want the eight occult powers; Mother, I don't want the other hundred powers; surrender, surrender, surrender; may I never be deluded by Your bewitching maya' (6.91).

### The Natmandir

M describes this building:

In front of the Kali temple and just to the south is the spacious natmandir. It is rectangular and the terrace is supported by both inner and outer rows of columns. Theatrical performances take place here on special occasions, especially during the night of Kali Puja. On the front side of the roof of the natmandir there are images of Shiva and his followers, Nandi and Bhiringi. Sri Ramakrishna used to salute Lord Shiva with folded hands before entering the Mother's temple, as if he were seeking his permission to enter the temple.<sup>7</sup>

One day M went to the natmandir, where he embraced the left column of the inner row on the north side of the building. He remained for a while with closed eyes and then said to his companions: 'This column has been touched by the Master. While listening to the *yatra* performance of Nilkantha, the Master embraced the column out of ecstasy.'<sup>8</sup>

M describes a wonderful scene that he witnessed in the natmandir during his third visit to Dakshineswar:

It was now late in the evening and time for M's departure; but he felt reluctant to go and instead went in search of Sri Ramakrishna. ... At last he found the Master pacing alone in the natmandir in front of the Kali temple. A lamp was burning in the temple on either side of the image of the Divine Mother. The single lamp in the spacious natmandir blended light and darkness into a kind of mystic twilight, in which the figure of the Master could be dimly seen. ...

In the dim light the Master, all alone, was pacing the hall rejoicing in the Self—as the lion lives and roams alone in the forest.<sup>9</sup>

### The Krishna Temple and the Courtyard

M wrote:

East of the chandni and twelve temples is a large tiled courtyard. There are two temples in the middle of the courtyard—the Radhakanta [Krishna] temple on the north side and the Kali [Divine Mother] temple on the south side. In the Radhakanta temple there are two images on the altar—Radha and Krishna—standing and facing west. Steps lead from the courtyard into the sanctuary. The floor of this temple is paved with marble. Chandeliers hang from the ceiling of the verandah. They are usually covered with red linen and used only during festive occasions. In front of the verandah is a row of columns.<sup>10</sup>

Ramakrishna became the priest of the Krishna temple when the previous priest slipped, dropping Krishna's image and breaking the foot. The Master subsequently repaired this image.

While listening to the Bhagavata on the veranda of the Krishna temple, the Master had a vision: he saw a light emanate from the image, then touch him, and then touch the Bhagavata; he experienced the truth that the scripture, the devotee, and the deity are one. On another occasion, a photograph of Ramakrishna was taken as he sat in front of this temple. This photograph subsequently became the one most commonly worshipped by the devotees in the shrine.

The Brahmos did not believe in God with form. When Keshab Sen and the Brahmos came to Dakshineswar, the Master would escort them to the temples. When they reached the Krishna temple, Ramakrishna would wrap part of his wearing cloth around his neck and bow down to Krishna from the courtyard, touching his forehead to the lower step of the temple. This is how he taught them to respect the deity.<sup>11</sup>

Blessed are the tiles of that courtyard! They were touched by the Master's feet thousands of times. M recalls:

Seven or eight days after my first meeting with the Master, as he was walking through the courtyard of the Kali temple I said to him, 'It is better to take one's life than to suffer such terrible pain.' At once he replied: 'Why do you say so?

You have a guru. Why do you worry? Your guru is always behind you. He can remove your suffering by a mere wish. He makes everything favourable. A juggler threw a rope with many knots in it in front of a thousand people, and none could untie a single knot. But the juggler immediately removed all the knots just by a jerk of his hand. Don't worry. The guru will remove all your obstacles.' What agony I was suffering, but I had found the Master. How he guided my life! Later my father came. We were reconciled with love and affection, and he took me back home. In retrospect we see that God is all-auspicious, but we judge things superficially. It was my family problems and my desire to commit suicide that led me to God (1.340-1).

### The Twelve Shiva Temples

M describes them thus: 'The chandni is located at the centre of twelve Shiva temples—six of them on the north and six on the south. Seeing the twelve temples from a distance, passengers in boats on the Ganges point out to one another: "Look! There is the temple garden of Rani Rasmani."' <sup>12</sup>



*The row of Shiva temples*

It is said that the Master embraced the northernmost image of Shiva, which is situated near his room. Swami Saradananda writes:

One day the Master entered one of the Shiva temples of Dakshineswar and began to recite the *Shiva-mahimnah*, a hymn in praise of the Deity. He was beside himself in ecstasy as he recited the following verse: 'O Lord, if the blue mountain be the ink, the ocean the ink pot, the biggest branch of the celestial tree the pen, and the earth

the writing-leaf, and if by taking this, the goddess of Learning writes forever, even then the limit of Your glory can never be reached.' <sup>13</sup>

### Ramakrishna's Room

Ramakrishna spent fourteen years, from 1871 to 1885, in a room located at the north-west corner of the temple courtyard and immediately to the north of the Shiva temples.



*Sri Ramakrishna's room*

After Ramakrishna's passing, M would tell the devotees:

One should see everything connected with the Master in detail. For example, in the Master's room there are cots, a jar containing Ganges water, pictures of gods and goddesses—Kali, Krishna, Rama, Chaitanya and his kirtan party, Dhruva, Prahlad, Christ extending his hand to the drowning Peter, and a white marble image of Buddha, which was given to him by Rani Katayayani, the wife of Lalababu. There was a picture of the goddess of learning on the western wall. Whenever a new person would come, the Master would look at that picture and pray, 'Mother, I am an unlettered person. Please sit on my tongue', and then he would speak to him. If a person can imprint these divine sights on his mind, he will have deep meditations, and even sitting at home he can live at Dakshineswar with the Master. <sup>14</sup>

One can feel the tangible spiritual atmosphere in this room. Here the Master had many visions, and he went into samadhi on numerous

occasions. This is where he received his visitors and disciples and talked to them about God. Unfortunately during the centenary of the Dakshineswar temple garden in 1955, the Master's red cement floor was replaced with mosaic tiles, so we can no longer walk on the same floor that he trod.

### The Semicircular Porch

M writes: 'To the west of this room is a semicircular verandah. Standing here facing west, Sri Ramakrishna would watch the holy river Ganga flow by. In front of the verandah is a narrow garden path running from north to south. On the other side of this path is the flower garden and then the embankment. From here, one can hear the sweet, melodious murmuring of the Ganga.'<sup>15</sup>

M later told Swami Nityatmananda: 'Sometimes at 2:00 or 3:00 a.m. the Master would pace on the embankment. He said: "At that time one can hear the *anahata* sound [music of the spheres]. Only the yogis can hear it.'<sup>16</sup>

### The South-east Veranda

Ramakrishna would walk through the south-east veranda when he visited the temples. Ramlal recalled: 'One day the Master was seated on the south-east veranda of his room. All of a sudden, he saw the Divine Mother standing on top of the temple, wearing Her anklets, extending one of Her legs towards the courtyard. Immediately he cried out and forbade Her, waving his hands: "Don't—don't go farther! You will fall." Saying so, the Master went into samadhi.'

One day Ramakrishna was resting on his bed while Baburam (later Swami Premananda) fanned him. Narendra (later Swami Vivekananda) sat smoking with Hazra on the south-east veranda of the Master's room. Hazra said to Narendra: 'You are all mere boys! You are visiting Sri Ramakrishna off and on, and he just keeps you satisfied with fruits and sweets. Hold

him—press him—and get something [power, wealth, and so on] from him.' As soon as the Master heard this from his room he jumped up from his bed, rushed to the veranda, and shouted: 'Naren, come to my room right now. Don't listen to his calculating advice. The beggar pesters the rich man, saying, "Sir, give me a pice! Give me a pice!" Being disgusted with the beggar, the rich man throws a small coin to him, saying, "Take this and get out of here." You are my very own. You will not have to ask for anything from me. Whatever I have, it is all yours.'<sup>17</sup>

(To be concluded)

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# Ujjayini: The Centre of Cosmic Rhythm

and the Simhastha Festival of 2004

DR MOHAN GUPTA

## The Centrality of Ujjain

Ujjayini or Ujjain, the city eternal, has been attracting the civilized world with the light of its religious and cultural attainments and the glow of its economic development since centuries. So much so that one wonders whether its glory, sustained through the vagaries of nature and the vicissitudes of history, could be attributed merely to human endeavour. Is there something in the very soul of this tiny city that enables it to weather the destructive forces of nature and man, and to rise from the ashes like a Phoenix? Perhaps the secret lies in its location at the 'centre of the universe', symbolized by Lord Mahakala, the embodiment of cosmic Time, its presiding deity.

The yogis of yore discovered by their transcendental knowledge that:

*Ājñācakram smṛtā kāśī yā bālā śrutimūrdhani;  
Svādhiṣṭhānam smṛtā kāñcī maṇipūramavantikā;  
Nābhīdeśe mahākālastannāmnā tatra vai haraḥ.*

'When this world is compared with the human body with its eight chakras (yogic nerve-centres), its Ajna chakra (in between the eyebrows) is Kashi or Varanasi, its Svadhīsthana centre (in the throat) is Kanchi and the Manipura (in the navel) is Avantika or Ujjayini, where resides Lord Shiva as Mahakala' (*Varaha Purana*). This analogy was in keeping with a similar conception of the ancient Indian astronomers. *Surya Siddhanta*, the celebrated treatise on Indian astronomy, declares:

*Rākṣasālaya daivokaḥ śailayormadhya sūtragāḥ;  
Rohitakamavantī ca yathā sannihitam sarah.*

'Situated upon the (central) line which passes through the abode of the demons (Lanka) and the mountain which is the seat of the gods

(Sumeru or the North Pole) are Rohitaka, Avanti and Kurukshetra' (1.62).

Thus, when civilization first dawned on humanity, Ujjain was located on the central meridian of the world, a place now enjoyed by the Greenwich Line. But Ujjain was not only situated on the East-West divider of the globe, it also stood on an important latitude inasmuch as the sun in its northerly course came up to Ujjain and then returned to its southerly course. The city lies on the tropic of Cancer. It was regarded as the centre of the universe because the position of planets was, and has been, computed with reference to the Ujjain mean meridian. This is true of a predominant school of Indian astronomy even today. Varahamihira, the illustrious astronomer, writes: '*Mithunāṁśe ca kuvṛttādānśa caturviṁśatiṁ vibhāyocaiḥ; Bhramati hi raviramarāṇāṁ samopariṣṭāt tadāvantyām*. The sun, at the end of its northerly journey through Mithuna, is seen moving round the abode of the gods 24° north of the equator. On that day, it is seen crossing the zenith over Ujjain' (*Panchasiddhantika*, 13.10).



The Mahakala temple of Ujjain





The Mahakaleshwara  
jyotirlinga

Bhaskaracharya (1114 CE), the most celebrated Indian astronomer, has also confirmed this in his famous *Siddhanta Shiromani*. Because of this significant position of Ujjain, its importance in the field of astronomy and mathematics spread far and wide in the civilized world. It is

well known that a batch of scholars led by Acharya Kanaka went to Arabia from Ujjain in the eighth century and taught astronomy and arithmetic there. The famous work of Brahmagupta (628 CE), the *Brahma-sphuta-siddhanta*, was translated into Arabic as *Al Sind Hind*. Indeed, Lord Mahakala or Nataraja, the Cosmic Dancer, resides at the centre of the universe.

### An Ancient Centre of Culture

However, Ujjain was the centre of the then civilized world not only astronomically and geographically but also culturally and economically. Rev. E Burgess in his famous translation of the *Surya Siddhanta* has nicely summed this up:

But the circumstance which actually fixes the position of the prime meridian is the situation of the city of Ujjayini. ... It is the capital of the rich and populous province of Malwa ... and from old time a chief seat of Hindu literature, science and arts. Of all the centres of Hindu culture, it lay nearest to the Great Ocean-route by which during the first three centuries of our era so important a commerce was carried on between Alexandria as the mart of Rome, and India and the countries lying still farther east. That the prime meridian was made to pass through this city proves it to have been the cradle of the

Hindu science of astronomy or principal seat during its early history.

So it is no surprise that the universal consciousness of a great poet like Rabindranath Tagore was nostalgically drawn towards this great holy city:

Far, far away  
in the dream world of Ujjain  
I once went searching  
for the first beloved of my previous life. ...  
Rising from the temple of Mahakala  
Were the grave notes of vesper bells  
The markets were empty, and above  
shone the twilight across the fading skyline.

As we glance through the history of this place, we find it mentioned in Valmiki's Ramayana, the world's first epic, and the Mahabharata, where it is presented in all its glory:

*Mahākālām tato gacchenniyato niyatāśanaḥ;  
Kotītīrthamupaspr̥śya hayamedhaphalam labhet.*

'Go next to Mahakala (Avanti) with regulated diet and senses subdued. By taking bath (there) in Kotitirtha, one gets the fruit of an Ashwamedha yajna.' ('Vana Parva', Mahabharata, 82.49).

Another verse attributed to the 'Udyoga Parva' of the Mahabharata mentions that Avanti was ruled by two brothers, Vinda and Anuvinda, heroic and resolute horsemen who had fought on the side of the Kauravas (and whose sister Mitravinda was married to Sri Krishna):

*Āvanyau ca mahīpālau  
mahābala susaṁvṛtau;  
Akṣauhinīyām ca kauravyām  
duryodhanamupāgatau.  
Vindānuvindāvāvanyau  
sammatau rathasattamau;  
Kṛtinau samare tāta  
dṛḍhāvīryaparākramau.*

With the Mahabharata, we are on the solid ground of history. This epochal event has been variously dated by modern scholars from 1952 BCE to 1450 BCE and 950 BCE.

Coming to the Puranas, they are replete

with descriptions of the all-round glory of this immortal city. The *Skanda Purana* devotes a whole section, 'Avanti Khanda', to describing every nook and corner of the place. But it is the *Brahmanda Purana* (chapter 43) that presents a picturesque view of the city from a secular angle to give us an idea of its magnificence:

*Devāyatanairdivyair  
sobhitā sā mahāpurī;  
Hṛṣṭapustajanākīrṇā  
drdhaprākāratoraṇā.  
Rathyāpaṇavatī ramyā  
suvibhaktā catuṣpathā;  
Samyaddhā sā munisreṣṭha  
vidvadbhiḥ samalaṅkṛtā.  
Jñātāraḥ sarvaśāstrāṇām  
bhattaraḥ śatruvāhinīm;  
Dātāraḥ sarvaratnāṇām  
bhoktāraḥ sarvasaṃpadām.  
Striṃyastatra munisreṣṭha  
dṛṣyante sumanoḥarāḥ;  
Suvarṇābharāṇopetāḥ  
sarvālaṅkārabhūṣitāḥ.*

'This great well-fortified city is adorned with magnificent temples, and bustling with men and women who are healthy and virtuous, scholars well-versed in all the shastras, warriors capable of conquering the toughest enemy, wealthy persons possessing all luxuries and yet ready to give away anything, and beautiful damsels laden with gold and diamond ornaments from head to toe and spreading the fragrance of sweet flowers, sandal paste and scents.'

Ujjayini was later described by the great poet Kalidasa:

*Svalpībhūte sucaritaphale  
svarginām gām gatānām;  
Śeṣairpūnyairbhṛtamiva divaḥ  
kāntimatkhāṇḍamekam.*

'A fluorescent piece of paradise brought to earth by the inhabitants of Heaven whose virtuous deeds are nearing exhaustion' (*Meghaduta*, 1.30). Seeing the prosperity of the city, Kalidasa was justified when he said that the oceans were bereft of their gems and pearls as all these had come to the markets of grand Ujjayini.

## The Sacred City

Due to its great prosperity and multi-faceted importance, Ujjain was called by various names, each one representing one or another of its prominent spiritual, cultural and economic sides. As Avanti, it is seen as the goddess who protects and preserves living beings in their germinal form; as Pratikalpa, it springs up again and again, ever renewing itself from *kalpa* (aeon) to *kalpa*—a fact substantiated by the many stratigraphic layers of the city and its pervasive presence in the mythology, history and literary imagination of India. It is Kanaka-shringa and Padmavati, full of palaces with golden pinnacles, dear to the goddess of wealth; it is also Kushasthali, the place of sacrifice laid with *kusha* grass by Lord Brahma himself. It is Ujjayini because here Lord Shiva achieved absolute victory over the demon Andhaka, who personified the forces of darkness and ignorance: Andhaka tried to steal Parvati, the pure intellect, out of lust and was destroyed in the Mahakala Vana, the forest of all-consuming Time. The story is reflected in Mahakala (who is also called Pratapana or 'the Scorcher' in the *Varaha Purana*) merging himself in the refulgent jyotirlinga called Mahakaleshwara.

Ujjain's immense sacredness can be judged by the fact that according to the 'Avanti Khanda' (5.70.31-2, 34, 91) it is supposed to be the abode of the eighty-four Mahadevas, the eight Bhairavas, the eleven Rudras, the twelve



Shipra arati

Adityas, the six Vinayakas, the twenty-four Devis, the ten Vishnus and the nine Grahas (the planets, sun, moon and the nodes):

*Īśvarāścaturaśītis-  
tathāṣṭau santi bhairavāḥ;  
Ekādaśa tathā rudrā”-  
dityā dvādaśa smṛtāḥ.  
Ṣaḍvaināyakaścātra  
devyaśca caturviṃśatiḥ;  
Yato’hamāgato bhadre  
mahākāḷavanottame ...*

Ujjain was a great seat of learning and this is borne out by the fact that Sri Krishna himself, along with his brother Balarama, had come here to study under the sage Sandipani. This story finds place in almost all Puranas including the Bhagavata.

### Ujjain in History

Though, archaeologically speaking, the date of this old city goes back to the Chalcolithic period—excavation near Garh-Kalika has yielded painted grey-ware and other supporting material in addition to the sufficient literary evidence already alluded to—its actual history begins in the sixth century BCE with the well known king Chanda Pradyota. The Puranas tell us that the last king of the Vitihotra dynasty was assassinated by Punika, who enthroned his son Pradyota. Pradyota’s daughter Vasavadatta’s love for Udayana, the king of Vatsa, and their elopement from Ujjain has been the subject of many a literary creation in Sanskrit. Ujjain acquired great power and prosperity during this time which is reflected in the archaeological remains of the period, specially a large moat 80 feet wide and 20 feet deep round the town of about two square miles.

During the great Mauryas, Bindusara was the governor of this province when Chandragupta was the emperor. When Bindusara came to power, his son Ashoka became the provincial



Sandipani Pith

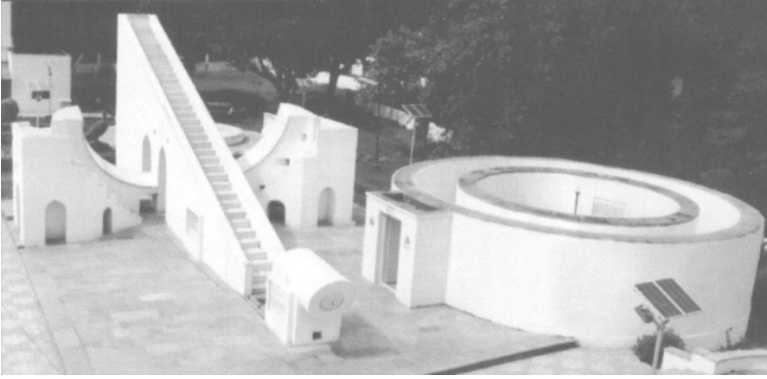
governor. Ashoka’s son Mahendra and daughter Sanghamitra were brought up and educated in Ujjain and it was from here that they went to Sri Lanka to spread Buddhism.

Agnimitra of the Shunga dynasty is the hero of Kalidasa’s famous play *Malavikāgnimitra*. This clearly indicates Shunga power in the area. The weak Shungas were conquered by Gardabhilla. As a result of his infatuation for Saraswati, sister of the Jaina monk Kalakacharya, Gardabhilla incurred the latter’s

wrath: Kalakacharya persuaded the Shakas of Sind to invade Malava (Malwa). However, within a short period the Shakas were vanquished by Vikramaditya, Gardabhilla’s son, in the first century BCE. Stories of Vikramaditya’s superhuman deeds, valour, wit and sense of justice abound not only in the Malwa region but all over India. Bhartrihari, the well-known ascetic, was his brother. The Vikrama Samvat (Vikrama era) of Indian chronology began in 57 BCE and is still in use in northern India.

Vikramaditya was followed by such illustrious kings as Rudradama, Yashodharma (who defeated Mihirakula, the powerful Hun king) and Harsha Vikramaditya (whose chief priest Hariswami authored the *Natyavartika* and a commentary [*vṛitti*] on the *Shatapatha Brahmana*; very likely, Hariswami also wrote the famous Sanskrit dramas *Ratnavati* and *Priyadarshika*).

After a brief intervention by the Rashtrakutas, Ujjain was taken by the Paramara kings in the late tenth century with Munja, the poet-king, and his illustrious nephew Raja Bhoja shifting the capital from Ujjain to Dhar. Bhoja was a great scholar and poet and an ardent lover of knowledge. He patronized scholars of all branches of learning and himself made



*The Ujjain observatory (vedhashala)*

no mean contribution to the vast treasure house of learning. His successor Naravarma repaired the Mahakala temple of Ujjain and had a panegyric in praise of Lord Mahakala carved out which can be seen even now.

But bad days for Ujjain came in the thirteenth century with the advent of Iltutmish, the sultan of the Slave dynasty, who invaded it and destroyed the Mahakala temple. He took away the statue of Vikramaditya to Delhi. During his time many temples of this pilgrim city were sacked and mosques sprang up on their remains, a fact that is obvious even now on the banks of the Shipra River. Mughal kings Akbar and Jahangir also had come to Ujjain and stayed in the Kaliya-daha palace situated in the middle of the Shipra. The palace was built by the Khalji king Mahmud Khan in 1437, probably after destroying the Kalapriyadeva sun temple that then stood there. Jahangir used to come by boat to meet Swami Jadrup, a great ascetic who performed penances in a narrow cave.

In the early part of the eighteenth century, Sawai Jaisingh was the governor of this Malwa province under the Mughals. He was known for his interest in astronomy. Jaisingh constructed four observatories in Ujjain, Jaipur, Mathura and Delhi, and the Ujjain observatory is functional to the present day.

Years before the 1752 peace treaty between the Mughals and the Marathas, this area had come under the suzerainty of the Marathas, and with this started the era of reconstruction

and renewal of Ujjain. Baba Ramachandra Sukthankar, the prime minister of Ranoji Scindia, built many temples here and did extensive repairs to the Mahakala temple. He also constructed the famous Ramghat on the Shipra River and made elaborate arrangements for the celebration of the

twelve-yearly Simhastha (Kumbha Mela) festival from 1732. In 1807 the capital of the Scindias was shifted to Gwalior, and throughout the British rule Ujjain remained the divisional headquarters of Gwalior state.

The present city of Ujjain is situated on the Bhopal-Ratlam section of the Western Railway at 23°11' N and 75°46' E on the Malwa plateau. It enjoys a salubrious climate and is well connected on all sides by rail and road links. The nearest airport is at Indore, only fifty-six kilometres away, from where there are daily flights to Mumbai and Delhi. It is a divisional headquarters of Madhya Pradesh with a population of over five lakhs. Located in an area of fertile black soil, cotton and soyabean are its main crops. In spite of all modern facilities now available here, the town retains its basic pilgrim character and is still a principal seat of learning, culture and spirituality. The Mahakala temple, the sacred river Shipra, Harasiddhi Pith, the temples of Chintaman Ganesh, Mangalanath and Kalabhairav, Sandipani Pith, the seat of Mahaprabhu Vallabhacharya, Kalidasa Academy, Vikram University, Jiwaji Observatory and a host of other religious and cultural institutions draw countless people to this holy town every year.

### **The Simhastha Tradition**

The origin of the Kumbha Mela festival can be traced back to the Puranas. Our scriptures teach that the supreme Reality, though

free from the limits of time and space manifests itself more in pure beings, on auspicious times and at holy spots. Hence the combination of these three factors becomes immensely sacred and brings great benefit to the world. Festivals like the Kumbha Mela at the hallowed cities of Hardwar, Prayag, Nasik and Ujjain, on the shores of the Ganga, Godavari and Shipra, during auspicious times augured by benefic combinations of heavenly bodies, and in the sanctifying presence of world-renouncing sadhus, are occasions of concentrated holiness. No wonder, therefore, that millions of devotees from the entire length and breadth of the country gather together on these occasions in order to purify themselves in the divine atmosphere.

Wherefrom does this burning faith spring? From the rich spiritual heritage of the country, from the words of the scriptures. Says the *Skanda Purana* (5.48.51):

*Pratikalpāmanuprāpya  
dṛṣṭvā devaṁ mahēśvaram;  
Vaiśākhē paurṇamāsyāṁ vai  
snāpayantye ka vāsaram.*

‘Having come to Pratikalpa (Ujjain) and having had the darshan of Lord Mahakala, they take a bath (in the holy river Shipra) on the full-moon day of Vaishakha (April-May).’ So also

*Avantī yātrā kartavyā  
prayatnena mumukṣuṇā;  
Mādhavē pi viśeṣeṇa  
hyavantī snānamācāret.*

‘One desirous of gaining salvation should make a pilgrimage to Avanti (Ujjain); especially, he should take a bath in the month of Vaishakha.’ Thus the Puranas announce auspicious results for the person who takes a holy bath in Ujjain in the month of Vaishakha, when Ravi (Sun) is in Mesha (Aries).

The *Brahmanda Purana* eulogizes Jupiter’s (Brihaspati) transit through Leo (Simha) as also very auspicious. This is in connection with the Godavari (at Nasik):

*Ṣaṣṭivarṣasahasrāṇi bhāgīratyāvagāhanam;  
Sakṛdgodāvarī snānaṁ simhayukte brhaspatau.*

‘Bathing in the Bhagirathi (Ganga) for sixty thousand years cannot equal a single bath in the Godavari when Brihaspati is in Simha.’

Similarly, mention is made of the Jupiter-Aquarius (Kumbha) conjunction with reference to Hardwar:

*Padminī nāyake meṣe  
kumbharāṣigate gurau;  
Gaṅgādvāre bhavedyogah  
kumbhanāmnā tadottamam.*

‘With the Sun in Mesha and Brihaspati in Kumbha, there is the festival of Kumbha in Gangadwara (Hardwar).’

From this we get an idea that originally Kumbha Melas were held only in Hardwar, when Jupiter was in Aquarius, and Nasik, when the planet was in the opposite position, that is in Leo. As far as Ujjain and Prayag are concerned, their auspiciousness lay in bathing there in the months of Vaishakha, when the Sun is in Aries, and Magha (January-February), when the Sun is in Capricorn (Makara) and begins its northern journey (*uttarāyana*), respectively.

Subsequently, when Nasik and Ujjain came under Maratha control, the rulers, influenced by a certain priest of Ujjain, are said to have extended the Nasik Kumbha Mela (Simhastha Brihaspati) to Ujjain, but in the month of Vaishakha, which was already auspicious for Ujjain. Similarly, some politico-religious authority seems to have made the same decree in the case of Prayag also, but in the month of Magha, when Brihaspati was in Mesha rather



The Simhastha Kumbha Mela of 2004

than Kumbha. And once the practice of holding the Kumbha festival at these four places gained acceptance and acquired authenticity, 'supplementary' Puranic stories were woven in support of it. That is why though the story of the churning of the milky ocean by the gods and demons is found in almost all Puranas, the idea of the pitcher being taken from place to place and the falling of nectar-drops at Hardwar, Prayag, Nasik and Ujjain—'*Viṣṇudvāre tīrtharāje'vantyān godāvārī tate; Sudhābindu vinikṣepatkumbha parveti viśrutam*. It is well known that since drops of nectar fell on Vishnudwara (Hardwar), Tirtharaja (Prayag), Avanti (Ujjain) and on the banks of the Godavari (Nasik), the Kumbha festival is held there'—is nowhere in them. So it can safely be presumed that it is a later addition.

It is in one of these Puranic supplements (*purāṇa mātmya*) that we read about the ten auspicious combinations for the Simhashta festival at Ujjain. The *Skanda Purana Mahatmya* says:

*Mādhve dhavale pakṣe śimhe jīve tvaje ravau;  
Tulārāsau niśānāthe svātibhe pūrṇimā tithau.  
Vyatīpāte tu saṃprāpte candravāsara saṃyute;  
Kūśasthālī mahākṣetre snāne mokṣamavāpnuyāt.  
Ete daśamahāyogāḥ snāne muktiphalapradāḥ.*

1) The month of Vaishakha; 2) the bright fortnight; 3) Jupiter in Leo; 4) Sun in Aries; 5) Moon in Libra (Tula); 6) the star Svati; 7) the full-moon day; 8) Vyatipata yoga, when Sun and Moon are parallel or with the same declination; 9) Monday; 10) in Kushasthali (Ujjain).

According to the reputed historian Jadunath Sarkar, the oldest Kumbha Mela mentioned in preserved historical records was held in 1235, probably in Hardwar. There is also a mention of the Nasik Simhashta in the fifteenth-century Marathi work *Guru Charitra*. The pres-

ent Simhashta tradition of Ujjain had a definite and organized beginning in 1732 during the regime of Ranoji Scindia due to the efforts of his prime minister Ramachandra Sukthankar.

### The Simhashta Festival of 2004

Ujjain celebrated the first grand Simhashta festival of the twenty-first century beginning from the Chaitra Shukla Purnima of Vikrama Samvat 2061 (Monday, 5 April 2004). Its other principal bathing days were Vaishakha Amavasya (19 April), Vaishakha Shukla Tritiya or Akshaya Tritiya (22 April), Vaishakha Shukla Panchami (24 April, Shankaracharya Jayanti) and Vaishakha Purnima (4 May). The first, third and last baths were declared royal baths (*shahi snan*).

The mela area was vast and vibrant, a veritable ocean of humanity with countless people pouring in from all sides. Cars, buses, trucks, trains—all bursting with passengers—were converging on this holy city throughout the day and night. It was an uphill task for the local administration to cope with the massive crowds, but they had elaborate arrangements in place in anticipation of such a turnout.

A 71-kilometre-long outer ring road connected all the six entry points to Ujjain and seven satellite towns were laid out around the



Devotees converging on Ujjain for the Simhashta



city with all basic amenities. Pilgrims could alight from their vehicles and move into them in local conveyances. The mela area, some 2,151 hectares, was divided into five zones and sixteen sectors spread on either bank of the Shipra. The locations of Shaiva and Vaishnava *akharas* were decided according to traditional protocol. Thus the Shankaracharyas of Puri, Dwarka and Jyotirmath and the abbot of Srimath, Dharma Sangh, Varanasi, were located in the Mahakal zone closest to the Mahakala temple. The Shaiva Dashamani *akharas* were located on the other side of the Shipra in the Datta *akhara* area closest to the river whereas all Vaishnava *akharas* were located in the Mangalnath and Bherugarh areas, a little away from Ramghat.

An estimated ten lakh sadhus gathered at this Simhastha and about two crore devotees took the holy dip this time, the last day alone witnessing a multitude of fifty lakhs!

The task of managing crowds of such enormous size was efficiently discharged by 15,000 policemen under the direction of about a hundred officers. Each sector had a five-bed hospital equipped with sufficient stocks of medicines and manned by doctors and trained paramedical staff. The zonal offices were headed by zonal magistrates aided by officers of all public-service departments: enquiry, water supply, power, fire brigade, ambulance service and sanitation. Hundreds of voluntary organizations too worked in tandem with the authori-

ties and provided various other services.

The religious leaders who adorned this mammoth congregation included Swami Nischalananda Saraswatiji, Shankaracharya of Govardhan Math, Puri; Swami Swarupanandaji, Shankaracharya of Dwarka; Guru Sharvanandaji of Gokul; Swami Satyamitranandaji of Bharat Mata Mandir, Hardwar; Swami Avadheshanandaji of Juna Akhara; Mahant Shivendra Puriji of Avahan Akhara; Swami Divyanandaji of Bhanpura Pith; Swami Srikanandaji Maharaj of the Ramkrishna Math; Barfani Baba, Sri Murari Bapu, Rameshbhai Oza, Sant Asaram Bapu, Sudhanshuji Maharaj, Prema Panduranga, Kanakeshwari Devi, Sadhvi Ritambhara, and many, many others.

The entire place was abuzz with spiritual discourses, recitations from the scriptures, *bhagat kathas* from the Bhagavata, expositions of the *Ramcharitmanas*, and enactments of *ramlilas* and *raslilas*. A number of free kitchens served thousands of pilgrims every day. Religious functions went on incessantly and the devotees participating in them augmented their store of punya. Ramakrishna Ashrama, Ujjain, with its avowed objective of serving jivas as Shiva, had also set up camp here. It offered residential accommodation and meals, hospital facilities and spiritual discourses; its bookshop sold spiritual literature.

The great festivals of Kumbha Mela and the Simhastha tradition of Ujjain are rooted in the very core of Hindu religious ritual; they have entered deep into the religious consciousness of India and Hindu society all over the world. The Simhastha, especially, has passed through so many vicissitudes during the medieval period—natural calamities, violent clashes between the *akharas*, the apathy of the rulers—that Ujjain, the city eternal, was on the verge of losing its grandest tradition. But thanks to the buoyant resilience of the Sanatana Dharma and the vibrant devotion of the Hindus, the festival has not only survived but over the years has acquired a status unparalleled in the Hindu world. \*



Naga sadhus get ready for the shahi snan

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# In the Vrindavan of My Heart

SWAMI ACHYUTANANDA

I am particularly fond of this part of Vrindavan—the bank of the Yamuna between Radhabagh and Tatiasthan—which has a few *kelikadamba*, neem and mango trees, over a hundred years old. Whenever I am in Vrindavan, I make it a point to come to this place after offering my daily pranams at Govindji's temple. Every day I come and spend some time out here, imbibing the pristine beauty of nature: the gentle fragrance of the flowers, the myriad chirps of birds, the sweet murmuring sound of the dark Kalindi (Yamuna), and the pleasing sight of cattle plodding back to their homes. Driving the cattle home this hot summer day was a dark cowherd boy, clad in a loincloth, staff in hand, with a white headband holding back a shock of unkempt hair. My mind was transported back to a similar landscape, set several millennia ago, when the cowherd boy had peacock plumes tucked into a neat headband and a flute instead of the staff. ... I was jerked out of my reverie by the tune of a well-known song wafting into my ears. As the singer drew nearer, I could discern the words:

O ye blue waters of the Yamuna  
Tell me, oh, tell me  
Where is the Dark One?

The voice sounded familiar, and when he came and stood in front it did not take me long to recognize the singer. But it took some time before he, in turn, recognized me. And a volley of

questions followed when he did: how I was, when did I come down from Uttarkashi, where was I putting up and the like. Amitananda was obviously happy to have met me again and that too in Vrindavan. I answered in brief, as best as I could. We had hardly exhausted our initial queries when it started raining.



Holy Yamuna at Vrindavan

## Haridas Swami, the Ascetic

We took shelter at Tatiasthan. Of all the ashramas on the banks of the Yamuna, this one has always been my favourite. The entire ashrama is surrounded by ancient groves. The inner courtyard is unpaved and covered

with sand. The inmates are austere celibates. They wear minimum clothing and paint their faces with a special kind of clay. This is the main centre of the monastic lineage of the well-known Vaishnava saint Haridas Swami. The ashrama has certain precious relics: the rug used by Haridas Swami, his begging bowl and a serpentine staff. Every year, on Radha Ashtami day, these holy relics are put on display for devotees. The main ingredient of the special food offerings made on this day is *kachu*, a small yam-like edible root—since *kachu* was the main item of Haridas Swami's sustenance! Such was his austere life. Haridas Swami had practised the sadhana of *sakhi bhava*, in which the sadhaka thinks himself to be a *sakhi*, a woman friend or confidante of Radharani. Haridas Swami looked upon himself as Lalita Devi, a

close companion of Radharani. The image worshipped in this ashrama is that of Bihariji. The head priest performs the worship with utmost dedication. He is well versed in Vaishnava philosophy. As we approached him, he offered us a mat to sit on. He asked the brahmachari who served him to get some prasad for us. After having had the prasad we asked him how the ashrama had been established.

‘There is a story behind this ashrama. That is the wonderful life story of Haridas Swami. He is widely known as the guru of the famous musician Tansen. But that is not his real identity. He had an amazing life. People in Vrindavan called him ‘Biharinji’, that is, the spiritual consort of Bihari or Sri Krishna of Vrindavan. Not much is known about his early life. He is said to have been born sometime in 1478 or 1480 in Rajpur near Aligarh in the family of a Saraswat brahmin who had migrated from Punjab. His father, Asdhir, was a Vaishnava sadhaka who had come to Vrindavan to dedicate himself to a life of spiritual austerities. Haridas married at an early age. But he had no attraction for worldly life and soon after the death of his wife, he too came over to Vrindavan to lead a life of spiritual austerities. He had his initiation from his father and chose the favourite haunt of Sri Krishna, Nidhuvan, as the place for his spiritual practice. He would sing devotional songs to his chosen deity thinking of himself as a companion of Radharani. His fame as a singer and musician soon spread far and wide.’

Even as the babaji was thus recounting Haridas Swami’s story, there was a tug on my shawl. Amitananda wanted to leave for Nidhuvan and tell the rest of the story at the very place of Haridas Swami’s sadhana. We took leave of the babaji—saying, ‘Radhe, Radhe’—and left for Nidhuvan.

Nidhuvan is a place of celestial beauty with numerous small groves and clusters of trees. It is surrounded by walls on all sides. It is the site of the divine play of Krishna and his



*Nidhuvan today*

holy consort Radharani, affectionately called Rai.

We soon reached the entrance to Nidhuvan. Amitananda advised me to deposit my belongings with the gateman, lest they were snatched away by monkeys. As we entered, he pointed to a small deserted temple, which he said was the original temple of Bihariji. Haridas Swami used to worship and sing to the Lord in this very temple. Later on, when a new temple came up, the image was shifted there. The whole courtyard was nicely paved. We crossed it and reached a second gate, which opened into Nidhuvan. This is the place that has witnessed many divine activities. It was here that Haridas Swami saw Bihariji himself in flesh and blood. We offered our pranams to the holy soil of Nidhuvan. The very thought that Krishna himself had walked on that soil made us feel hesitant to tread upon it. I trembled all over to think that it was here that Krishna, the supreme incarnation of divine love, danced with the blessed gopis, who were themselves embodiments of divine love! I thought how they would leave all the attachments and attractions of the world and come here to be with Krishna—to dedicate themselves at the feet of the Divine! I was standing at that very place!

I bowed down to Radharani again and again. As we walked a little to the right, we came across a temple-like precinct. It had three small shrines, the middle one slightly bigger than the

other two. This housed the samadhi of Haridas Swami. It was here that he would immerse himself in deep spiritual practices and in singing to the Lord.

It was in this place that we met Radhikadas Babaji. He had been practising spiritual austerities for quite some time in Vrindavan. He would stay in Nidhuvan at daytime and would go to Kala Babu's grove at night. The elderly babaji was sweeping the place when we went there. He gestured us to wait for a while. Having finished his work he came and sat near the temple and asked us to do the same. We learnt that before taking to this life of renunciation he had been the drawing teacher of a renowned English-medium school. His frail figure was sparsely clad in a piece of white cloth. He wore a single tulsi bead strung on a white thread round his neck. His large eyes had a deep, sad look and an ineffable beauty in them. He was probably around sixty. I requested him to tell us more about Haridas Swami. He looked at the temple and then delved deep within himself to fish out the invaluable accounts of this great sadhaka.

### Haridasji and Rai-Kishore

Radhikadasji told us that Nidhuvan was actually called Nidhivan—precious treasure—by the old-timers. It is regarded as the most important of the twelve groves that go to make Vrindavan. The people of Vrindavan believe that even today every night Krishna performs *rasa* here with Radharani and other gopis. It is for this reason that no one is allowed to stay within the walled precincts of Nidhuvan at night. It is believed that if anyone happens to stray inside by chance or choice, (s)he does not come back to narrate what (s)he saw at night. Even animals

stay away from the place at night. The purity and holiness of this place can be imbibed only by a realized soul. Haridas Swami came here in 1503 and had his realizations in this very place. It is said that he would invoke the presence of Shyamal-kishore and Rai-kishori with his music and he could actually visualize them. His famous book *Kelimal* depicts his divine visions and his experiences with his beloved deity. *Ashtadasha Siddhanta*, another work of his, is an important text on the philosophy of the *sakhi* cult. This book outlines his mode of sadhana in eighteen lucid verses. The sadhakas who live at Tatiasthan on the banks of the Yamuna are mostly followers of Haridasji's *sakhi* cult.

But a lot of change has come over the place and its surroundings over the past five hundred years. The countless groves and the endless trails of *tamala* and *kadamba* trees are practically no more.

Babaji paused for a while, and what he said next arrested my attention even more: 'Did you know that when Sri Ramakrishna came to Vrindavan he had met Ganga Mai, a famous practitioner of this sect in this very place?' Ganga Mai too looked upon herself as Lalita. When she saw Sri Ramakrishna in *mahabhava*, that supreme state of divine inebriation, she was convinced that he was none other than Dulali, that is Radharani herself, and so behaved with him accordingly. Sri Ramakrishna was also attracted by the devotion of Ganga Mai and was even thinking of settling down permanently at Vrindavan. We find this episode in his biographies. As I heard all this, Nidhuvan became all the more attractive and meaningful to me.

Vitthal Vipul is said to be the first dis-



*Sant Haridas Bhajan Sthal in Nidhuvan*

ciple of Haridas Swami. Attracted by his mode of sadhana, he asked Haridas Swami: 'You worship the divine couple as your beloved. Can everyone see them as you do?' The guru replied,



Haridas Swami shows Kunjabihari to Vitthal Vipul

'Surely, when the time is ripe.'

One morning, in 1515, Haridasji called his disciple and said, 'Today is a holy day. Do you know why? It is your birthday. And today you will see your chosen deity. Come, let us meditate upon him in this Nidhuvan.' Saying this, he took his disciple to the north-eastern corner of Nidhuvan. Haridasji had his *tanpura* with him. Gradually the mellifluous strain of his bhajans spread across the grove and permeated the whole of Nidhuvan. The disciple sat transfixed as the guru dived deep in that ocean of soulful music. The atmosphere was ecstatic. Suddenly, in one corner of the grove, there appeared the resplendent figure of the divine twosome, one dark and radiant and the other gorgeously fair and bright, locked in embrace! Haridasji's voice broke out in a fresh strain:

O friends, behold this beautiful twosome,  
Fair and Dark, like cloud and lightning!  
The two splendid ones shine as one,  
Sitting here Haridas beholds Kunjabihari  
—his master!

The divine twosome smiled as they heard the song. The divine lady asked Haridasji, 'Lalita, what do you wish of us?' Haridasji replied, 'Kishoriji, you have forgotten me! Why should it be otherwise? How can you remember us

while drinking of the divine bliss of Bihariji's company?' 'Why, Lalita!' intervened Bihariji, 'Your wish has already been granted. Shall we remain here in this grove in this very form?'

With folded hands Haridasji said, 'Friends, this is the form that roams the groves (*nikunjabihari*). How can I worship this form outside this place? Pray unite and remain here for ever, for the welfare of all; let your devotees have their wishes fulfilled by seeing this unified form.'

Haridasji's wish was granted. The divine couple vanished from sight only to leave behind the beautiful icon of Bankebihariji, which was found at that very place. This new image was ceremonially installed and worshipped with utmost love and affection. The offerings were distributed among the peacocks and monkeys. Even today the fifth day of the bright lunar fortnight of the month of Agrahayan—called Bihari Panchami—is celebrated in remembrance of this event. The image is also called *ichhabihari*, one who roams (or stays) of his own accord. Bihariji is said to be permanently present here holding his beloved Rai within his heart.

Haridasji used to be perpetually immersed in divine moods, virtually seeing his beloved deity at will. Gradually the intensity of his emotions became a deterrent to his day-to-day functioning as the priest of Bihariji and Haridasji voluntarily handed over the responsibility to his disciple Vipulji. As time went on, Vipulji also became incapable of bearing the formal responsibility of Bihariji's worship and the duty was next transferred to Jagannath Goswami, a nephew of Haridas Swami. He was a family man, and the first in a line of goswamis performing the services at Bihariji's temple. The goswamis who presently conduct the services to Bihariji are none other than the descendants of Jagannath Goswami.

Babaji once again looked at the three shrines. In the centre lay Haridasji, and the samadhis of Vitthal Vipulji and Jagannath Goswami stood on either side. On every Bihari

Panchami day, Haridas Swami's portrait is carried in procession in a palanquin to the present temple of Bihariji, and a grand concert is organized there wherein renowned musicians from all over the country come to participate. Legend has it that once Akbar himself had come here to listen to the music of Tansen's guru, Haridas Swami. It is said that Haridasji refused to sing for the king, as his music was only for the service of his beloved and not for the pleasure of worldly people. But Akbar did get to hear him sing from a distance without the swami's knowledge. He was so impressed by Haridasji and the other ascetics at Vrindavan that he named the place Fakirabad and issued a firman banning all killing of animals within its precincts. Mirabai too visited Vrindavan towards the end of her life and offered her devotional songs to Bihariji. In 1573 Haridas Swami entered mahasamadhi and became one with his beloved at the age of ninety-five.

### The Lila of Bankebihariji

The following day was Akshaya Tritiya. On this day Bihariji's image is decked up very lightly and displayed with both feet uncovered for the devotees to see. This is the only day of the year when this kind of darshan is granted. So there is a huge rush of pilgrims and devotees on this day. We too went to have darshan of the deity. But due to the heavy rush of devotees I could not stand for long inside the temple and decided to come again the following day.

Next day one of the goswamis took me close to the image and pointed out all the details that I had missed the previous day. At the base of the image, to its left, is a portrait of Haridasji in the Rajasthani

miniature style, done in oil. It is turned slightly towards the image so as to make it easier for the swami to look at his beloved all the time. Everything that is offered to Bihariji is first touched to the swami's portrait to signify that even now it is he who is serving Bihariji.

To the right there lies a crown; it is the emblem of Radharani. Below the crown is an oval stone, with a radius of about two inches. This is a *radhayantra*, which probably had an esoteric geometric diagram (called the *radhayantra*) marked on it at one time. This was used by Haridas Swami as an aid to his sadhana. The priest in service could not tell us much about the origin of this yantra. The little icon is kept on a velvet cushion, decked in a long *ghagra* (skirt), and placed to the left of Bihariji as a symbol of Radharani. She is sprayed with perfume twice a day, as is Bihariji. But most wonderful is the ritual involving their rest. Both in the afternoon and at night, this *radhayantra* is placed on Bihariji's chest, symbolizing the union of supreme Shakti with the supreme Self. The ritual has been in practice ever since the days of Haridas Swami.

There is yet another distinctive feature of the worship here. At the time of arati, every two minutes a curtain is briefly drawn across the sanctum portal as if to hide Bihariji from the gaze of the devotees. Several explanations are given for this. According to one, attracted by the ardent gaze of a devotee, Bihariji had once almost walked away with her. The priest realized this and pulled the curtains to prevent him from going away. The ritual has persisted ever since. It is called *jhanki darshan* (or brief vision).

When Sri Ramakrishna came to Vrindavan with Mathur Babu, it was



Bankebihariji



at this place that he had many spiritual experiences. He later said, 'At the sight of Banku-Behari I was overwhelmed with emotion and ran to embrace him.' Various other sites of Vraja associated with Krishna's lila aroused his spiritual emotions. I also remembered Sri Sarada Devi's prayer to Krishna: 'Your form is bent but Your mind is straight—kindly straighten the windings of my mind.'

All these associations add to the attraction of Vrindavan. Even as my mind was lost in these thoughts, Goswamiji called and took me close to the image. He told me that since Haridas Swami had asked Krishna and Rāishori to become one, the image here is dressed in a special way. The 'thrice-bent' (*tribhanga*) form is first dressed in a pyjama which is then covered with a *ghagra*; the chest is covered by a short blouse with a shirt on top. On one side of the head there dangles a long plait, symbolic of Radha, while on the other side there is a diadem with peacock feathers, symbolic of Krishna. There is a diamond nose ring too. This image of Krishna does not hold a flute. Only on the full-moon night of the month of Ashwin, when the image is dressed as Madan Mohan, is it given a flute and dressed up gorgeously for the special *rasa* festival held that night.

Food offerings (*bhog*) are made four times a day and dressed betel rolls, with condensed milk and nuts inside, are offered each time with the *bhog*. An essential item of the *bhog* is the *dahi-vada* (salted doughnuts soaked in curd), which is supposed to be a particular favourite of Bihariji. Legend has it that once he went out of the temple in the guise of a little boy and purchased *dahi-vada* from a shop by

pawning his gold bangle. Next day the news of the missing bangle spread like wildfire. When the neighbouring shopkeeper heard this, he confirmed that a small boy had pawned a gold bangle the previous night to buy *dahi-vada* from his shop. After that it did not require much sleuthing to identify the culprit! Since then the shopkeeper started sending the choicest *dahi-vadas* for Bihariji's *bhog*.

### Gyangudri: Where Knowledge is Overwhelmed

I often take solitary walks on the banks of the Yamuna. Winter is setting in. It is becoming difficult to remain outdoors for long. One day I met Krishnadas Babaji near Gyangudri. When I told him that of late I had been thinking of him quite often, he was pleased and called me over to the cemented platform nearby. The Gyangudri is an oval-shaped sand enclosure bound by a stone platform. A stone plaque announces the importance of the place. I asked Babaji why this place was held in such great reverence by the people of Vrindavan and he explained the reason: When Krishna left for Mathura, the gopis almost went mad with grief at his absence. Coming to know their condition, Krishna sent Uddhava as his messenger to console these grief-stricken, lovelorn gopis. And this was the place where Uddhava met them. At that time Gyangudri was thickly wooded and the Yamuna used to flow close by.

Uddhava was struck by the depth of the gopis' love for Krishna and the intensity of their suffering on account of this separation. In comparison, his own love for Krishna and the depth of his spiritual knowledge appeared but a trifle. In fact, the place takes its name



Uddhava gets an idea of the gopis' devotion to Krishna



*Gyangudri: The spot where Uddhava met the gopis*

from this realization of Uddhava. *Gudri* means a quilt or covering in Hindi. Uddhava's jnana got covered by the bhakti of these devotees of Krishna. The enlightening conversation between Uddhava and the gopis forms the famous 'Bhramaragita' episode of the Bhagavata. Krishna had sent Uddhava to the gopis to make him realize that jnana was not the only means to the realization of the supreme Self and that divine love or bhakti can also take the aspirant to the same goal. When Uddhava saw the gopis he realized that what he saw was merely their bodies—their souls were already merged with Krishna. This realization removed all pride of knowledge from Uddhava's heart. All that he wished was to roll in the soil hallowed by the touch of the blessed devotees of Krishna and be reborn as the trees, bushes or groves that are permanent witness to the divine drama of this blessed place. Gyangudri draws its sanctity from this incident and is held in high reverence by all Vaishnavas. When a Vaishnava breathes his last in Vrindavan, his body is brought to this place, kept here for some time and then immersed in the Yamuna or cremated. On the Ratha Yatra day in the month of Ashadh, all the temple chariots converge to this place in procession. A large fair is also held at the time. Gyangudri is one of the holiest sites in Vrindavan.

### The Tulsi Temple

Having narrated this, Babaji rose to leave. He went a short distance and stopped in front of a small temple. This was Tulsidasji's temple, he said. When Tulsidasji came to Vrindavan, he was disappointed at not seeing his own beloved *ishta*, the lotus-eyed Sri Rama. In his prayers to Krishna he said that he did not like this place, for his lotus-eyed beloved, bow and arrow in hand, was not seen there. He added, 'O Krishna! Either you reveal yourself as my Rama or I quit this place right now!' And to grant the desire of a bhakta, Krishna had to take the form of Rama, replacing his flute with a bow and arrow. Babaji asked me to go in and see the image. I went inside the ornately frescoed temple and saw the *tribhanga* image with bow and arrow in hand. Tulsidasji was apparently so overwhelmed that he recorded this experience in an impromptu couplet, which remains engraved on the temple wall to this day, reminding the devotees how God himself bows down to bhakti and gratifies the bhakta.

As I saw all this, I was reminded of a similar incident, when Narayana himself along with Lakshmi had to take the form of Rama and Janaki to grant the desire of their supreme bhakta Hanuman. At this Hanumanji had said: 'Though Srinatha (Vishnu) and Janakinatha (Rama) are one and the same as the supreme Self, still my all-in-all is Rama, the lotus-eyed.'

The experience of Mahavira in the Treta-yuga was repeated in the Kaliyuga for Tulsidas. I bowed low to the great bhakta Tulsidas and also to Krishna, the carrier of the bow and arrow.

There are a few more temples around Gyangudri. As the gongs in the temple announced the evening arati, I rolled on the holy soil of Gyangudri, unobserved by anyone, and walked back to the ashrama thinking of Radharani immersed in her *mahabhava*.

*(To be continued)*

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# In Search of the Divine

## An Account of the Twelve Shaktipithas of West Bengal

SWAMI CHIDRUPANANDA

Let us start with a story, the wonderful mythical story of Dakshayajna that we find in slightly modified forms in the Mahabharata ('Shanti Parva', ch. 283), Puranas like the *Brahma Purana* (ch. 39) and *Kalika Purana* (ch. 18), Tantras like the *Yogini Tantra*, and in many other scriptures like the *Devi Bhagavata* (7th *skandha*). The story will help explain the concept of the Shaktipithas easily.

Lord Shiva is an aspect of the highest Absolute. He is known by various names like Mrityunjaya (victor over death) and Pashupati (lord of created beings). His Energy is worshipped as the Universal Mother, who is all-merciful, all-powerful and all-pervading. *Mother* is the sweetest word known to the Hindus, and motherhood is the highest ideal of Indian womanhood.

Be that as it may, according to legend the Mother Goddess—in her form of Sati, one of Daksha Prajapati's daughters—was the wife of Shiva. Once Daksha Prajapati was performing a great sacrifice to which he had invited all the gods in heaven except Shiva and Sati. Sati desired to attend the yajna but Shiva refused. Undeterred, Sati revealed to her husband her awesome Dashamahavidya form and an overwhelmed Shiva allowed his wife to go to the yajna. So Sati went to her father's sacrifice uninvited, and was insulted. Unable to bear the ill-treatment, Sati gave up her body by an act of yoga. When the news of Sati's death reached Shiva he was furious and rushed to the scene with his numerous attendants, the *ganas*. The sacrifice of Prajapati Daksha was completely destroyed by the demon Virabhadra, who is said to have been created for the purpose by Shiva. Inconsolable, Siva then roamed over the world dancing a mad

dance carrying Sati's dead body on his shoulder. The gods became anxious and requested Bhagavan Vishnu to free Shiva from his infatuation. They conspired to rid Shiva of his wife's corpse and Vishnu cut Sati's body to pieces with his discus Sudarshana. The fifty-one places where the limbs fell became Shaktipithas, or sacred spots or seats of the Divine Mother. In each of them she is believed to be living in a particular form along with a particular Bhairava. This then is the story behind the worship of Shiva-Shakti.

From the spiritual angle, the human body too can be viewed as an altar of the Divine. According to Krishnananda Agamavagisha's *Tantrasara*, the fifty-one parts of the human body represent the fifty-one Devipithas. The worshipper imagines these various parts of his body as divine altars and concentrates the thought of the Universal Mother on them, thus converting his own body into a veritable Devitirtha. For example, at the base of the spine (*muladhara*) resides Devi Kamakhya and Bhairava Umananda. The worshipper must establish a yantra, a mystical diagram or symbol of the Divine Mother, in order to worship Shiva-Shakti. It is written in the *Bhairava Tantra* that the bulk of the body should be imagined as a site of joy and worshipped as such. Thus having withdrawn himself from the mundane world and absorbed in meditation, the worshipper is completely immersed in samadhi and becomes one with the Divine Mother.

According to the *Pithanirnaya Tantra* the fifty-one pithas, scattered all over India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal, Tibet and Sri Lanka, have their own *pīṭhadevatās* (forms of the Devi), *kṣetrādhiśās* (Bhairavas) and the Devi's

*āṅga-pratyāṅgas* (limbs and ornaments). The *Shivacharita* also lists fifty-one mahapithas; besides, it supplies a list of twenty-six more upapithas (pithas of lesser importance). The word *upapitha* is also found in works such as the *Sadhanamala*. The Bengali almanac, *Vishud-dhasiddhanta Panjika*, too describes the fifty-one pithas, including their present modified addresses.

This article, however, is restricted to an account of the twelve Shaktipithas located in West Bengal: 1) Kalighat in Kolkata; 2) Kshiragram, 3) Kogram and 4) Ketugram in Bardhaman; 5) Bolpur, 6) Labhpur, 7) Sainthia, 8) Nalhati and 9) Bakreshwar in Birbhum; 10) Lalbagh in Murshidabad; 11) Salbari in Jalpaiguri; and 12) Tamruk in Medinipur.

### Devi Kalika of Kalighat

The mahapitha of Kalighat is situated in south Kolkata to the east of the Adi Ganga. It is a very ancient place of pilgrimage and one of the most important Shaktipithas, being a mahapitha, siddhapitha (seat of success) and guhyapitha (esoteric seat) in one. Here fell Mother's right little toe. Describing the authenticity of the place, the *Pithanirnaya Tantra* says: '*Nakulīśaḥ kālīpīṭhe dakṣapadāṅgulī ca me; Sarvasiddhikarī devī kālīkā tatra devatā*. Nakulisha [is the Bhairava] at Kalipitha, [where fell] My right little toe; Devi Kalika, who grants all siddhis is the [presiding] deity there.'

The builder of the old temple was Raja



Devi Kalika

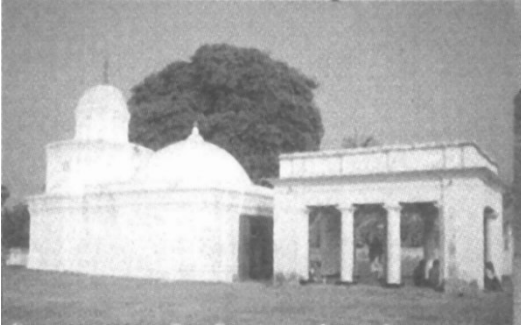
Basanta Ray, uncle of Pratapaditya and the king of Jessore, Bangladesh. In order to ensure that Mother's service and worship continued smoothly, he offered 595 bighas of land to the temple. This temple was situated on the banks of River Adi Ganga. It is believed that once upon a time bandits used to offer human sacrifices here. The goddess here is very alive (*jā-gratā*). Even the East India Company had made a votive offering of five thousand rupees desiring the success of their political objectives! The present temple was built by Santosh Ray, a member of the famous Sabarna Chaudhuri family of Barisha, Kolkata, in 1809. To the south of the temple are the natmandir and the site for animal sacrifice; to the north-east are the temples of Nakuleshwara Shiva and the Anadi Linga; to the west is the Radha-Krishna temple. Beyond this is the Adi Ganga. The Radha-Krishna temple was built in 1843 by Udaynarayan Mandal, the zamindar of Baowali.

The image of Devi Kalika of Kalighat is incomplete. The original image did not include Shiva. Now, however, one can see a small silver statue of Shiva there. Suryakumar Chattopadhyay says in his *Kalikshetra Dipika* that only the face of the deity was made first, from stone obtained from the basin of the Kalikunda lake. The hands, made of gold and silver, the tongue, the Shiva statue, and all the jewellery were added over the years.

Mother's toe is preserved in a box recessed into the stone image. This is only taken out on the auspicious day of Snan Yatra. During this observance the priests bandage their eyes while giving Mother the ceremonial bath. A large number of devotees throng the place on the auspicious occasions of Kali Puja, Durgashtami, New Year's Day and Sankranti. A little distance away from the temple, towards the south on the bank of the Adi Ganga, lies the Keoratala burning ghat.

### Devi Yugadya of Kshiragram

According to the *Tantrachudamani*, the Divine Mother says: '*Bhūtadhārī mahāmāya*



Kshiragram temple

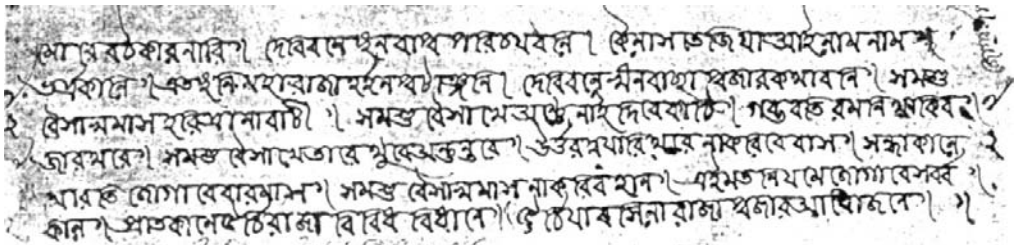
*bhairavaḥ kṣīrakhaṇḍakaḥ; Yugādyāyān mahāmāyā dakṣaṅguṣṭhaḥ pado mama.* Mahamaya, the nourisher of beings, and Bhairava Kshirakhandaka [preside] at Yugadya, where My right big toe [fell]. Mahamaya, however, is called Devi Yugadya in these parts. The sixteenth century *Shivacharita* also concurs: '*Kṣīragrāme mahādevo bhairavaḥ kṣīrakhaṇḍakaḥ; Yugādyāyān mahāmāyā dakṣaṅguṣṭhaḥ pado mama*', meaning that Mahadeva is known as Bhairava Kshirakhandaka and Mahamaya as Yugadya at Kshiragram. In the well-known Bengali play *Mahiravan Vadh*, there is mention of the goddess Yugadya, whom Mahiravana worshipped as Devi Bhadrakali. After the destruction of Mahiravana, at the Devi's command Sri Ramachandra asked Hanuman to establish her in Kshiragram: '*Māthāy pratimā kare āno hanu-mān; Abanimaṇḍal madhye kshiragrām nām.* Carry the image on your head, O Hanuman; take it to the place called Kshiragram.' Interestingly, Swami Prabhananda in an article in *Udbodhan* (vol. 110, 110-15) says that Sri Ramakrishna himself transcribed a village drama on Devi Yugadya of Kshiragram. In his beautiful

handwriting, he wrote in praise of the goddess: '*Yogādyār bandanā likhyate. Jay mā jogādyā bande kshiragrāmbāsi; Abanite siddhapīṭh gupta bārāṇasī. Dakṣiṇ haste kharpar māyer bām haste khāṇḍā. Rābaṇer ghare mātā chhile ugracāṇḍā.* The praise of Yogadya is being written. Glory to Mother Yogadya residing at Kshiragram, a siddhapitha on earth, the secret Varanasi. With a skull in your right hand and a sword in the left, [you were] Ugrachanda in Ravana's home.'

The goddess of Kshiragram is also known as Kshirabhavani. The temple was founded by the king of Bardhaman. Surprisingly, there is no image in the temple; prayers are just offered at an altar. The original Devi image was immersed in the nearby lake during a Muslim attack. Later, in 1284 BE, a new image similar to the original was made. It has ten hands. But following the old practice, this statue of the Devi is put inside a box and kept immersed in the lake throughout the year! On the last day of the month of Vaishakha, it is brought out of the water and placed on the altar for worship. This is the only day when everyone can see her.

According to a local legend, in former times there used to be human sacrifices at the place. But once when it was the turn of a devoted brahmin to become the offering, he prayed to Mother for his life. Then Mother herself appeared and stopped the practice forever.

There are two ways Kshiragram can be reached. By road, one can go from Kolkata to Bardhaman and then proceed to Koichar village, which comes on the way to Katoa. By rail, one has to travel from Bardhaman to Koichar, from there make a four-kilometre bus journey towards the south-east, and then turn right and



'Jugadyar Pala' in Sri Ramakrishna's handwriting

follow a *kuchcha* road for another kilometre to reach Kshiragram.

### Devi Mangalachandi of Kogram



Mangalachandi:  
An artist's conception

After visiting Devi Yugadya at Kshiragram one can go to the Ujanipitha at Kogram. Kogram is about one kilometre west of Natunhat and is situated on the bank of the Ajay river. Here the road bifurcates, one path leading straight into the village, while

the other, turning east, passes by the famous poet Kumudranjan Mallik's house and ends at the temple. In the olden days this place was known as Ujaninagara. So Kogram is also called Ujani-Kogram. Two rivers, Ajay and Kupur, flow on either side of the village. Laced by the Ajay, the temple is a delightful sight.

Ujani is counted among the important mahapithas by scriptures like the *Pithamala*, *Tantrachudamani* and *Shivacharita*. Rent by the Sudarshana, Sati's left elbow fell here. The deities of this place are Devi Mangalachandi and Bhairava Kapileshwara. Here the Devi is conceived as the ten-armed Durga. She is seen sitting on her lion and slaying the demon Mahisha. Regular prayers and services are held in the temple. On the new-moon night of the month of Kartika a grand service with offerings and prayers is organized. It is written in the stories about Mangalachandi that the legendary Dhanapati Saudagar was born in this village. Before his journey to Singhal he is said to have prayed to Mangalachandi. Inside the temple there is a statue of Buddha seated in the lotus posture. There is also a statue of the sixteenth tirthankara, Shantinatha. All this suggests that in bygone days there was a happy combination of the brahminical, Buddhist and Jain religions

in Ujani-Kogram.

In order to reach Kogram one can go from Koichar to Natunhat by road or from Guskara (near Bardhaman) to Natunhat by train, though the distance is only fifteen kilometres. The best way to reach Guskara is by the Ganadevata Express or Shantiniketan Express. One can find buses or cars for hire outside the Guskara railway station.

### Devi Bahula of Ketugram

Ketugram was formerly known as Bahulapitha. Situated in Ketugram Palli, the place lies fifteen kilometres north of Katoa. About the Bahulapitha it is written in the *Pithanirnaya*: '*Bahulāyām vāmbāhurbahulākhyā ca devatā; Bhīruko bhairavastatra sarvasiddhipradāyakaḥ*. At Bahula[pitha] fell [Sati's] left arm. [Here] the Devi is known as Bahula and Bhiruka, the bestower of all siddhis, is the Bhairava.' The Devi is also called Bahulalakshmi by the locals. At a short distance from Ketugram fell Sati's lower lip, near the Ishani river, where the temple of Devi Attahasa or Phullara stands. Together these two places are known as yugmapithas, or twin pithas.

Situated inside Ketugram village, the small temple of Bahula has beautiful surroundings. Walking straight through open fields from here, or by taking the *kuchcha* road from Nirāl, three kilometres away, one can reach the temple of Attahasa or Phullara on the bank of the Ishani. The temple is surrounded by a dense forest. However, there is no mention of the place in the government gazetteer. According to the government, the Attahasa temple is in nearby Labhpur in Birbhum district. But locals believe that Attahasa belongs to Ketugram. Jajneshwar Chaudhuri, in his book *Bardhaman: Itihas o Sanskriti*, says that the twin pithas are located in Ketugram. But then again, many other books, including the *Vishuddhasiddhanta Panjika*, say just the opposite.

The original statue of the Devi, like everything else of the Ketugram temple, is said to have been destroyed by the dreaded iconoclast





Ketugram Bahula

Kalapahar. Or it may be that the Devi was re-established in Labhpur in anticipation of an attack by him. The Bhairava too is missing from the Attahasa temple; he is now in the neighbouring village of Bilvashwar. Be that

as it may, one must visit the Attahasa temple along with the temple of Bahula.

The image of Bahula in Ketugram is very beautiful, but there is no image of Bhiruka in the village. People worship Bhutanatha of Srihand as Bhiruka here. The image of Bahula, made in the likeness of Durga in black stone, is about five feet high. She stands atop a special three-tiered lotus altar. She has four arms. Ganesha and Kartikeya sit on either side of her. According to local belief, King Chandraketu built this temple and initiated the regular worship. Every year on the day of Mahanavami elaborate arrangements are made for the Devi's worship when sacrifices are offered.

### Devi Devagarbha of Bolpur

Seven kilometres from the Bolpur railway station, on the bank of the Kopai river, lies Kankalitala. *Kaṅkāla* means skeleton in Sanskrit. It is said that Sati's skeleton fell here (though some believe that it was the Devi's hip that fell here). The names of the presiding deities are Devi Devagarbha and Bhairava Ruru, which is obvious in the *Tantrachudamani* verse: '*Kāñcīdēśe ca kaṅkālo bhairavo rurunāmakah; Devatā devagarbhākhyā ....*' Many, however, identify Kanchidesha with Kanchipuram in Tamil Nadu.

There is a small pond beside the temple at Kankalitala. When the alien invaders attacked and destroyed the old temple, they threw the

image into the pond. Strangely enough, this pond never dries up and is the main seat of the Devi. Local people address prayers and offer their gifts to the water. The new temple and image are of fairly recent origin. To the south of this temple stands another, dedicated to Bhairava Ruru. The place is very beautiful. The many trees around the temple create a pleasing and serene atmosphere. A story from the *Markandeya Purana* says King Suratha had performed one lakh sacrifices in order to receive the blessings of Devi Chandi. The place derived its original name of Balipur from those sacrifices (*balis*); Bolpur is just a variant name.

### Devi Attahasa of Labhpur

Our next stop, Labhpur, is about twenty-five kilometres north of Bolpur and Kankalitala and about twelve kilometres from Ahmedpur. Labhpur is quite a developed village. In earlier times the place was known as Attahasa. During the Muslim rule, the place became a famous



Attahasa temple

business hub and was renamed as Labhpur (*labh* meaning profit or gain).

The debate regarding the authenticity of the two Shaktipithas of Labhpur and Ketugram still remains undecided. Be that as it may, here the Devipitha is set amidst a grove of tamarind and *tamal* trees near the village.

We shall read about the legends and important events associated with this spot in the next instalment.

(To be concluded)

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# The Magic of Angkor

DR SAIBAL GUPTA

It was another time in another India. Ocean-going ships, laden with merchandise and bearing young fortune-seekers, priests and scholars, and also some soldiers to protect them all, set out from the east coast of India to explore the distant lands of South-East Asia, braving the unstable weather of that region. The *Periplus* and the writings of Ptolemy, Plutarch, Pliny and Strabo indicate the presence of a large empire in eastern Bengal in the fourth century BCE known as Gangaridai with its capital at Gangabandar (Gange), which was a big port on the Bay of Bengal at the mouth of the Kumar River. To the west of Gangaridai was the empire of Prasioi (Prachya), on the western side of the Ganga as it flows down out of the Rajmahal hills, with a seaport at Tamralipta, which still exists as the small town of Tamluk. The Chinese silk trade, before the discovery of the overland route through Central Asia, passed through north-eastern India and Bengal and ships from Bengal took the merchandise along the coastal route around Kanyakumari and brought them to traders on the west coast, who in turn took them across the Arabian Sea along the coast of Sind and Baluchistan to the mouth of the Persian Gulf. From there it used to travel all over Middle East as far as modern Israel, the kingdom of Solomon, and then to the Phoenicians of the Mediterranean. Indian traders later discovered the direct route across the Arabian Sea

to the mouth of the Red Sea and shared this route with the Arabs for centuries.

Similar expeditions crossed the eastern seas and the mainly coastal trade graduated to seafaring vessels going to Siam, the Malay Peninsula and Sumatra and then through the Malacca Strait to Java, Bali, Cambodia and Vietnam up to south China. During the time of the Roman Empire the trade in spices from South-East Asia, silk from China, fine cotton fabric, red pepper and *pippali* from Bengal was so prolific that the Roman drachma became legal tender in Bengal and still survives in the

Bengali language, as in 'Koto dam? What is the price?'

During the eighth and ninth centuries CE the entire sea trade closed down on both sides of the Indian peninsula. On the eastern side, a religious injunction came into force for unknown reasons banning sea voyage; anyone crossing *kala*

*pani* or 'the black waters', as the sea came to be called, lost his caste. It was so effective that the entire eastern sea trade came to a stop. It is difficult to know how effective this injunction was in the south and west, but overseas commerce in those parts too slowed down. In the west, traders began to depend more and more on the Arabs to transport their goods and thus saved the expenditure of maintaining a maritime fleet. In the south, the collapse of the Chola and Rashtrakuta empires probably contributed to the end of maritime trade, since no big power



The author in front of Angkor Wat. The perimeter wall and moat surrounding the temple complex can be seen in the background

followed them. All this had a deep and lasting effect on India's history and culture. Today one has to travel to the outposts of Indian civilization to taste the grandeur of the India that was. These outposts got detached from the mainland at various times but evolved on their own, keeping alive their traditions, culture and way of life unaffected by the changes that took place in their motherland. Over time they too disintegrated or were forgotten, until the Europeans rediscovered them recently. These relics appear like preserved museum pieces of Indian philosophy and culture of bygone days. The ruins of Angkor are one such museum. For the author, visiting them was a pilgrimage.

### The Journey

Cambodia, the land of the Khmers, known as Cambodge in French and as Kambuja to us Indians, was renamed Kampuchea in 1989 and has its capital at Phnom Penh. Between the ninth and fifteenth centuries, the core of the Khmer empire was in the vicinity of Angkor. The ruins of Angkor lie in Siem Reap province, whose capital is Siem Reap city situated 320 kilometres north of Phnom Penh. The area was ravaged in the past decades by civil war and the atrocities and genocide of the Khmer Rouge, from which it has not yet fully recovered. Even today the tourist is cautioned against leaving the paved road and loitering in the jungle for fear of landmines. Siem Reap is a small city with an international airport that brings throngs of tourists from all over the world. However, there is no direct flight from India. Visitors usually change flights at Bangkok and obtain their visas there or on arrival at Siem Reap. In fact the locals rue that there are very few Indian tourists. To them we are rich and better people. Big banners across main roads warn tourists that child molestation is a serious crime punishable by imprisonment in the tourists' own country. The warning has been issued by the UN in order to protect the poor population ravaged by flesh trade, which has resulted in a high incidence of HIV-AIDS in the region.

Coming out of the airport one sees a small, sparsely populated town with a few main roads and red, dusty fields. Apart from a few new high-rise hotels and some shops, the rest of the town mostly consists of small single- or two-floor wooden houses. The big hotels are expensive but there are large numbers of small or medium-sized hotels that are not bad and give good service. Rooms in these can be booked through the Internet and are clean and really cheap. I got into one such hotel in a newly built corner of the city and liked it. The hospitality of the people of South-East Asia is well known and the Cambodians are no exception. I hired a car with a guide for three days at an unbelievably cheap price. Group tour buses are also available but these are mainly European or American groups. I always love to travel alone taking my own time, so that my mind can work without being cluttered by unnecessary conversation. This allows me to interact with the local people and thereby get to know the place better. It also enables me to combine travel and solitude within myself. I got an intelligent young man as guide who was bubbling with stories about each and every site. Whenever necessary, he guided me to safe restaurants, which were large open sheds in the shade of big trees serving tasty and hygienic food. The time was mid-February. Though it was cool in the shade it was already too warm in the sun outside. I could imagine how hot it would get in summer! Thus started my pilgrimage.



*A view of the Tonle Sap 'floating market'*

### A Brief History of the Region

The time between the first and eighth centuries makes up the proto-historic period. Research into the prehistoric period of the place has yielded scarce data. There was a presence of cave-dwelling Stone Age people as early as 6000 BCE in one area, and the farming people, who domesticated cattle and were organized in small villages, appeared after 500 BCE.

The socio-political history of Cambodia and South-East Asia starts at the beginning of the common era, in the first century CE, with the appearance of Indian ships, followed some two hundred years later by the Chinese. The early site of Oc Eo in the Mekong Delta, which flourished in the second century, has yielded Indian jewellery, Roman coins and Buddhist religious artefacts. This combination indicates the eastern seaboard of India as the source. At this time Indian trade with China through the north-east was suffering from the attacks of nomadic frontier tribes, and improved knowledge of shipbuilding and navigation pushed Indian ships eastwards towards China across the Bay of Bengal. This was closely followed by the Chinese themselves pressing eastwards.

Early Chinese records of the third century show the presence of the state of Funan occupying the southern parts of Cambodia and Vietnam, where the culture was Indian and the religion brahminical; the dialect, however, was derived from the Mon-Khmer family of languages. The Chinese considered South-East Asia a land of barbarians and were not interested in settlements. Whereas the Chinese were explorers and record-keepers of history from the earliest times, the Indians cared little about

history and less for exploration, except in the line of trade. But they brought their socio-religious culture that bonded the small coastal maritime settlements into ports and then into cities followed by states.

Chinese texts and Sanskrit and Khmer inscriptions describe the mythical origin of Funan from the marriage of an Indian prince of the Chola dynasty or an Indian brahmin with the daughter of the local Naga king. The Nagas were serpent spirits who inhabited the waters and ruled over the soil. Similarly, in another inscription from the third century, the origin of Champa, a kingdom in central Vietnam, is ascribed to the marriage of a prince named Kaundinya, who travelled to that land, with Princess Soma, the daughter of the Naga king.

The history of this region during this period reads like chapters of Indian history with names of kingdoms like the Champa of Vietnam, the Dvaravati of Thailand, the Pyu of Burma, the Srivijaya and Sailendra of In-

donesia—all fighting with each other. Whether all or even most of the kings were of pure Indian origin is doubtful, as it was common even among known usurpers to take Indian or Sanskrit names to appear honourable. The overall culture was Indian with a mixture of the Vedas, the Upanishads, the Puranas, the Ramayana and the Mahabharata, followed by Mahayana and Theravada Buddhism, and all of it mixed with tribal naturalism and animism. One or another aspect of this mixture predominated depending on the taste of the king in power and probably on other social or economic factors. Most scholars call this cultural process Indianization rather than Indian colonialism. Even during the Angkor period, from the ninth



*The towers of Angkor Wat*



*Entry to the gopura guarded by lions*

to the fifteenth century, all the kings had Varman for their surname. This is true even of the present king of Cambodia, who retains the appellation in his full official name.

Angkor is unique in that it has preserved a historical record of this amalgam of culture along with its political and social history in monument after monument and in extensive galleries of bas-relief carvings over successive epochs with very little damage. This is something that is unparalleled anywhere.

### The Topography of Angkor

Angkor is situated in a large basin formed by the Kulen Hills in the north and the Tonle Sap Lake in the south. The plateau is drained by tributaries of the Siemreab River and marked by three hills: Phnom Bok, Phnom Bakheng and Phnom Krom. These hills, the sites of the early capitals of Jayavarman II (802-850), Indravarman I (877-889) and Yashovarman I (889-910), are purely Hindu sites dedicated to Shiva. The total area of Angkor covers 5,000 square kilometres.

The Tonle Sap is the largest freshwater lake in South-East Asia. The Sab River flows out from this lake to join the Mekong River, and Phnom Penh is situated at their confluence. The monsoon rains raise the water level of the lake and the tides of the Mekong keep the Sab flowing downwards throughout the year to provide an external waterway for Angkor. It is the main sup-

port for fishing and agriculture in the area. A large population lives on the lake—in floating houses fixed to the lake bed—with floating vegetable gardens, fisheries enclosed within reed barricades, schools, a post office, dispensary, police station, restaurants, a church, wireless stations and mobile markets—all on boats! Today a large number of these lake people are Vietnamese. However, most of the important monuments of Angkor and the royal palaces and the capital city of Angkor Thom are situated on the plateau.

The most important element a city or a kingdom requires for survival is water. Angkor is an example of efficient water-resource management in the contemporary world. In addition to access to the Siemreab River (which, though, is rather far away) and the Tonle Sap Lake, rainwater used to be harvested. Vast areas of land were enclosed by earthen dams, called *barays*, to contain rainwater. There are four such *barays*, built by powerful kings. The largest one measures 8,000 by 2,100 metres. In the centre of each *baray* there is an artificial hill on which stand beautiful ornate temples that were approachable by boat in those times. Today, however, most of those dams have crumbled and the lakes dried up, except the Indratataka *baray* (893 CE) at Roluos, where seaplanes used to land during the Cambodian war. There are rainwater reservoirs inside Angkor Wat too.



*The causeway from the gopura to the main temple*

## The Monuments

It is impossible to describe all the ruins of Angkor in one article. This narrative will focus on the Angkor Wat temple complex and the capital city of Angkor along with the temples of Preah Ko, Ta Prohm and Banteay Srei. Scholars are of the opinion that the word *angkor* is derived from the Sanskrit *nagara*. But, interestingly, Angkor Thom is described in some of our popular literature as Omkar Dham. *Wat* means temple. So Angkor Wat could be Omkar Mandir.

It is generally accepted that Angkor was founded by King Yashovarman I and was named Yasodharapura; Angkor is a later name. King Suryavarman II (1113-1150) built Angkor Wat but he died before construction was complete. The temple was known as Paramavishnuloka and had a big image of Vishnu under the central tower. At Vishnu's feet was embedded a gold urn that contained the ashes of the king. The temple was designed by a brahmin named Divakarapandita, who was reputed to have spiritual powers and was probably the king's guru. Vishnu was removed and replaced by Buddha during the reign of the next important king, Jayavarman VII (1181-1220), who embraced Mahayana Buddhism. In between the two reigns Angkor was defeated and ravaged by the Chams of Vietnam. The Buddhists did not destroy the extensive bas-reliefs depicting scenes from the Ramayana and Mahabharata, the Puranas, and the king's campaigns but added a gallery devoted to Buddha. The temple became a Buddhist monastery that outlived the Angkor empire. However, the Buddha in the central tower is now no more and many Buddha statues in the gallery have



*The eight-armed Vishnu  
with the Buddha head*

been defaced. This might have happened during a short period of Hindu resurgence, but more probably it is the work of vandals. A large Vishnu statue, which might or might not have been the original one that was in the central tower, stands in a colonnade on the right side of the gopura at the entrance and is still worshipped. A later image of Buddha is also worshipped in the temple. The Vishnu image that is worshipped today was once decapitated, but the

head was later found and reattached, and the locals worship it. Western accounts say that it is a Buddha head on a Vishnu body but the locals do not think so.

Each area of Angkor Wat is laid out according to measurements specified in the Hindu architectural and astronomical charts. However, the temple faces west, which is rather unusual for a Hindu temple. Some Westerners suggest that because it is actually a mausoleum it faces the setting sun. But a more plausible explanation is that it faces India, the Vishnuloka. Angkor Wat is an immense monument occupying a rectangular area of 500 acres defined by a laterite wall, which is surrounded by a 200-metre-wide moat filled with water. The perimeter of the wall measures 5.5 kilometres. A huge causeway built with massive sandstone blocks runs across the moat. The balustrade signifies the body of the snake god Vasuki with its many-headed hood raised at the entrance. Even the roofs of the vestibules are parts of Vasuki's coiled body. After crossing the causeway one enters through a short flight of stairs a raised platform that stretches in the form of a cross all the way to the main temple complex. The temple's three towers are symbolic of the Meru

mountains, the abode of the gods. The proportions are enormous yet beautiful. Midway on this inner causeway are two beautiful ruined buildings on either side that once housed libraries.

Angkor Thom is the inner capital city with many palaces from different periods built by individual kings and is also encircled by a wall and a moat. There are four gates to this city. Over each gateway is a head with four faces facing in the four directions that smile benevolently on the onlooker. This is the head of Avalokiteshvara. There is a large central plaza with a rampart on one side where the king and his retinue sat and watched marching troops and festivals. Jayavarman VII, who built the city on the pre-existent Yashodharapura, also built this rampart, called Elephant Wall because of the rows of elephants on its frontal bas-relief. Jayavarman conquered many countries and his territory extended from Vietnam through Thailand to lower Burma up to the borders of the Pagan kingdom. It was he who built the highway from Angkor to Phimai in Thailand.

After a 30-minute drive from Siem Reap comes the beautiful ornate temple of Banteay Srei, or 'the citadel of women'. This was built in the second half of the tenth century by Jayavarman V, successor of Rajendravarman II, who had set in motion a period of peace and prosperity after decades of political instability. It is ac-



*Angkor Thom: Avalokiteshvara overlooking the eastern gateway*

that they might have been Shiva temples. Furthermore, at Preah Ko Jayavarman built a temple that has Buddha and Shiva figurines facing each other across a central colonnade. Curiously, some shivalinga bases in the chapel have holes for three lingas, which have vanished a long time ago. A European tourist asked me why there were three shivalingas together. It reminded me of Bali, where

Shiva represents a formless trinity—Paramashiva, Sadashiva and Dhyana-shiva. This corresponds with the Shaivite thought of India that was strong in the eighth and ninth centuries. The concept is still alive in Bali in the temples of Besakih, Mengui and the more recent one at Tanah Lot. Interestingly, Jayavarman rejected Vishnu but found Shiva compatible with Buddha, and in Indonesia a formless Shiva happily coexists with Islam! He probably found Avalokiteshvara and Brah-



*Banteay Srei: Millennium-old lintel depicting Ravana shaking Mount Kailas*



*Angkor Wat: Apsaras  
in the inner sanctum of the central tower*

ma, the god of sustenance, similar and so built a temple to Brahma at Ta Prohm (literally, 'Ancestor Brahma'). It has both Shaivite and Buddhist areas and a dancing hall where stone apsaras dance. Thick tree roots intertwining with the stone structures hold the temple together. The task of preserving this monument has now been delegated to Indian archaeologists following a visit by former Indian prime minister Atal Behari Vajpayee.

Throughout history attempts at religious integration has had its enemies with people choosing strife for selfish reasons, and the time of our story was no different. Still, it appears to have succeeded in Angkor at least until the early fourteenth century when Indravarman III (1295-1307), a follower of Theravada Buddhism, ruled. After that there was a steady de-



*Trees with giant roots springing  
from the walls of the Preah Ko temple*

cline. But Angkor remained the capital till 1432 though subject to repeated aggressions. Then the Khmers gradually moved towards Phnom Penh abandoning their great city—and Mother Nature gathered Angkor to her bosom, as it were, and guarded it with giant trees and dense jungle, thus preserving one of her unique civilizations for posterity.

### **'I Have to Win Sita Back'**

After three days of continual walking my legs are aching. I sit in a teashop in the central plaza of Angkor Thom across the Elephant Wall. The shopkeeper offers a large glass of very dark tea with lemon and local sugar. It is very sweet but refreshing. The afternoon sun slants into the shop. The shopkeeper's pretty thirteen-year-old daughter comes and sits near me and, like all teenagers, laughs for no reason, bubbling with curiosity. She asks me where I come from. I look around at the scenery and reply, 'From here.' She doubles up with rippling laughter. I ask her name. 'Sita', she says. I say, 'My name is Ram. Will you marry me?' She lets out a peal of laughter. Her mother, busy sorting vegetables, admonishes her across the shop and the adoring father sitting at the table just smiles and looks on—it is a scene from eternity. Sita asks, 'Will you buy some souvenirs from me?'

'I can buy you as a souvenir', I reply. 'How much do you cost?' There is great laughter all around and the girl runs away to her friends. Then they come and encircle me and I stroke their heads. My mind floats away ... I did not conquer this land, but it became mine. I won it with love. I shared with these people my heritage and they cherished it. Now they tell me 'Ram is ours.' Maybe, today Ram is more theirs than mine. I forgot this greatness of mine and became smaller and poorer. I have to win it back for my own survival and growth. I cannot afford to forget my little Sita. \*



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# Alaska!

More than a Dream, So Close to Reality, and Yet So Unique

PRITHA LAL

**T**he first thing I will always remember about Alaska will be the pearl-grey waters of the Knik Arm reflecting the light of the sun and the view from the plane window. It was breathtaking! It was the 10 p.m. August sun that shone over the Anchorage coastline.



The way it cast its mystical spell over the still ocean waters, I knew this was going to be different from any other place I had been to. And it truly was. As soon as the plane touched down, there was a light drizzle—and then I saw it: a lovely arch just outside the plane window. Yes, the rainbow said it all. This would be a lovely trip. Alaska made me feel at home that day with that rainbow and I know I will always want to go back.

Anchorage is a nice quiet town. It has the downtown area, the corporate buildings, a Sam's Club and a Costco store; it also has Great Clips and Toys R Us. But beneath all that there is a starkness, a striking solitariness in the place that attracted me immensely. The vegetation is green, but not lush; there are flowers all over the place and

colours one would expect in the tropics. It seemed as though the flowers had to bloom in all their glory and splendour for the little summer sun they received, lest the snow and ice should make visitors forget the lovely hues they brought to the landscape. The local people are so nice, the food is great, there are lovely places to shop, and the museum is filled with some really neat artefacts about the Alaskan Pipeline, the shaman spirits, the topography of the tundra, the life of the Eskimos, etc.

The train ride from Anchorage to Seward was beyond words. One hears of the Alaskan cruises, but few people know of the beauty of the Alaskan railroad as it traverses through the mountains from Anchorage to Seward. It hugs the coastline, overlooks deep gorges and ravines, winds its way through hundreds of waterfalls, and comes really close to glaciers. The landscape is green, filled with various types of evergreens, and the track is lined with wayside wild flowers. Fireweed is the most common wild flower one



sees; these long magenta blossoms just seem to peep out of every nook and cranny and fill the mountains with colourful patches.



The stillness and quiet of the mountains, the total wilderness in these areas is so calming ... the mind just turns inwards and you find yourself saying a prayer for all that you have been blessed with, and for this opportunity to view nature in her glory and splendour. The camera will not—cannot—do justice to the stark, lonesome beauty of this place. One can only try to bring back as many memories as one can in little rolls of film or on digital memory cards.

The cruise along the fjords of Seward was quite an experience. Even the rain squall and the tumultuous ocean were not enough to dampen the fun of viewing rocks covered with white seagulls, diving puffins, leaping salmon, jellyfish, sea lions, mountain goats along the cliffs, some really interesting seaweeds ... the list is endless.

Then came Denali. I had read about it, seen documentaries on it, but seeing it in person was a dream come true for me. The summit of Mount McKinley was covered with clouds, but the National Preserve is just huge and what I could see that day was just a fraction of it. I know I have to go back for a week to really get a feel of the place.

Unlike in most national parks I have vis-

ited, the trail along the Savage River here is not a paved one, and that is what made it so much fun. It felt as if you were making your own trail through the wilderness as you hiked along with small furry animals and different types of birds. And you really heard the sounds of nature—the rippling river, the chatter of squirrels, the distant sound of rain—and somewhere along you saw a moose or a caribou (but I have to go back to see a bear, though).

All the time in Denali, I really did not know how to fathom the wilderness, what to make of the quiet. I have been in wide open spaces, whether it was the Grand Canyon or the Zion National Park, the Pacific Coast in Oregon or Interstate 1 through California, the Swiss Alps or the English Channel. I have always known what the places made me feel. But Denali left me speechless—and



then I saw this quote at the visitor centre: *'The wilderness at Denali answers many questions for man, questions that man has not yet learned to ask.'* That summed it up for me.

As my eyes scanned the August night sky for a faint glimpse of the northern lights before my Delta flight took off for Salt Lake City, I knew that somewhere deep inside, Alaska had touched my soul ... and I knew I had to come back for more.

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# The Many-splendoured Ramakrishna-Vivekananda Vedanta - II

DR M SIVARAMKRISHNA

## The Supernatural

What has Sri Ramakrishna to do with the supernatural, the miraculous? It is part of his uniqueness that he was totally against any miracle- or mystery-mongering. That is the point which makes him figure in *The Oxford Book of the Supernatural* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994). In this massive anthology of 555 pages, the editor—a distinguished litterateur, D J Enright—cites a passage in the section entitled ‘Miracles and Prognostications’. Enright obviously was not directly familiar with Ramakrishna. He cites Michael Edwards, the famous historian, who in turn cites from Max Muller’s *Sri Ramakrishna: His Life and Work*. And the passage is: ‘The nineteenth-century Indian mystic Ramakrishna used to tell his disciples of the man who had spent years acquiring the power of walking on water. Crossing a river on foot, the man went proudly to his guru only to be told, “My poor boy, what you have accomplished after fourteen years’ arduous labour, ordinary men do by paying a penny to the boatman.”’ I was not able to consult Michael Edwards’s book *The Dark Side of History* (1978), otherwise I would have known the context in which he quoted Max Muller.

This is an interesting dimension: Western writers on Ramakrishna are struck by his total indifference to the aspect of *siddhis*. Not that such powers did not exist in Ramakrishna (quite a few are cited in Swami Abhedananda’s *My Life Story*), but he regarded them as by-products which, far from having any significance for, are positively inimical to the spiritual life.

In contrast, we have the Master figuring at two places in a big-sized book which, running

into 607 pages, is remarkable in many ways. It is called *Spiritual Literacy: Reading the Sacred in Everyday Life*. Described by Nancy Brook as a book ‘that will sustain you for years to come’, it is regarded as ‘a banquet for the soul’ by Lawrence Kushner. ‘Using more than 650 brief examples from contemporary books and movies, [the passages] tutor us in the art of lingering with experiences and seeing the world with fresh eyes. They present spiritual perspectives on things, places, nature, animals, leisure, creativity, service, body, relationships and community. The Alphabet of Spiritual Literacy describes the key spiritual practices—from attention to zeal—that spell meaning in daily life.’

## Grace and Service

The editors, Frederic and Mary Ann Brusat, choose two passages from Ramakrishna (182, 325). The first figures in the section on ‘Grace’: ‘Ramakrishna declares, “The winds of grace are always blowing, but you have to raise the sail.”’

‘The world’s religions all recognize the importance of service to others’, say the editors and quote a story illustrating this: ‘Mythologist Joseph Campbell tells a story on this point. A troubled woman came to the Indian sage Ramakrishna saying, “O Master, I do not find that I love God.” He asked, “Is there nothing, then, that you love?” She responded, “My little nephew.” And he said to her, “There is your love and service to God, in your love and service to that child”’ (325).

In short, grace and service are the basic letters in the alphabet of spiritual literacy. One more thing to be noted is: generally it is a ‘compatriot’ whose ‘commendation’ of Ramakrishna is the reason which makes editors/authors

quote him. That is, such writers may or may not have read the original sources. This is an interesting phenomenon: Ramakrishna becoming the exemplar of a universal context either of a spiritual or a mystical nature. The pathological concern for original authentic texts is refreshingly absent here.

Recently I was surprised by an amazing coincidence. I was casually looking at a book which I had with me for quite some time. Its title is *Inevitable Grace*. 'Grace' again. Written by Dr Piero Ferrucci 'a leading European psychotherapist', the book 'presents research on the most significant and beautiful experiences in the lives of 500 men and women of various times and cultures—sages, artists, scientists, mystics, pioneers, political leaders and athletes—and discusses in detail their abilities'. The author 'shows that transpersonal experiences such as creative inspiration, ecstasy and illumination, rather than being the monopoly of a few exceptional people are our common heritage, and the truest expression of our being—natural, simple states within reach of us all'.

One thing which strikes us in this description is the figuring of Ramakrishna among scientists, political leaders and even athletes—contexts which we usually assume are secular. The first mention of the Great Master is in the 'Way of Illumination' (chapter 3; 122-3). 'The breakthrough' in this path, says Dr Ferrucci, 'comes as the result of a search in the dark. The Indian sage Ramakrishna likens it to the experience of a burglar feeling his way around a room in the dark touching one object after another; he says *neti, neti* to himself—"not this, not that." He then comes across the gem he had been looking for and recognizing it [at] once, rejoices: "This is it!" In short, 'the point of arrival is the point of departure'.

The next context is the 'Way of Science'. It is an extremely fascinating and right now the most relevant area: science as a way of illumination. The author, with his characteristic insight, observes that he proposed to 'discuss a basic attitude in this path' [of science] which is

'intellectual honesty'. And using 'analogy and chance' he tries to 'show that scientific work is a much subtler process than mere logical reasoning and systematic observation—that there *is* madness in this method'. Finally, 'tackling the next subject, discipline', he 'brings to light the more balanced and systematic side of science. Finally, by looking into curiosity and wonder in scientists, we reach the transpersonal roots of scientific research.'

### Discipline

It is in these frames of analysis that Dr Ferrucci cites Ramakrishna and Vivekananda (section on 'Discipline') alongside Isadora (the dancer), Renoir (the painter), Napoleon, Pedro de Alcantara (the Spanish mystic) and Reinhold Messner (the South Tyrolean mountaineer): 'The Indian yogi Swami Vivekananda complained to the sage Ramakrishna, his teacher, that the noise from a nearby jute factory disturbed his meditation. Ramakrishna advised him to concentrate on the noise itself—and the problem was solved.'

The way in which the allegedly 'spiritual' arena of Ramakrishna's 'divine play' and its benchmark of 'discipline' now becomes the common denominator of creative achievement in almost all fields is remarkable! Could anyone imagine the Great Master appearing alongside Napoleon and a mountaineer? Perhaps, in this sense, it is necessary to have a re-look at science *and* spirituality. The equation could be science *is* spirituality. Indeed, if every soul is potentially divine and the Divine manifests in myriad ways, what is outside its purview? Here is insider/outsider, the One and the other are linguistic games, if not gallows!

### Devotion

The next area is the 'Way of Devotion'. Here the motif is 'surrender'. Surrender is seen in many ways: for Jalaluddin Rumi, it is 'becoming an instrument in the hands of God', 'a harp upon which the Divine played wonderful melodies. Yet others have thought of surrender

in terms of death. In dying one becomes inanimate, like a stone or a piece of wood.' After this comment, Dr Ferrucci quotes Ramakrishna: 'Live in the world like a dead leaf. As a dead leaf is carried by the wind into a house or on the roadside and has no choice of its own, so let the wind of Divine Will blow you wherever it chooses' (269).

Finally the Master and Swamiji figure again when Dr Ferrucci describes visions as one of the characteristics of 'Transpersonal Experience'. Initially, the doctor draws a distinction between 'intuition' and 'full-blown enlightenment'. 'Intuition', he says, 'is seeing a truth for a moment at a distance; enlightenment means complete fusion of the I with the Self-gnosis. It is a form of knowledge that transforms the knower more than any other.'

The author provides a detailed account of the 'encounter' between the Master and his disciple and also notes that Narendra was predisposed to 'visionary experience' even before he met the Master. And 'when they met, Ramakrishna turned to him and, *following an ancient Indian custom* of physical contact between master and disciple, placed his right foot on the young man.' What happened next is quoted in Narendra's own words: 'Immediately I had a wonderful experience. My eyes were wide open and I saw that everything in the room, including the walls themselves, was whirling rapidly around and receding, and at the same time, it seemed to me that my consciousness of self, together with the entire universe, was about to vanish into a vast, all-devouring void. This destruction of my consciousness of self seemed to me to be the same thing as death' (331).

'A short time later', says Dr Ferrucci, the Master touched him again and 'with that marvelous touch of the Master', Narendra's 'mind underwent a complete revolution'. There was 'nothing whatsoever in the entire universe but God ... everything I saw was God.'

Thus the Great Master is cited in contexts concerned with: i) creative inspiration, ii) the way of science, iii) discipline, iv) the way of de-

votion, v) surrender, and vi) experience

*Inevitable Grace*, from which I drew these details, also interests us in another aspect: I was curious to know whether Dr Ferrucci was familiar with the sources in English. The only source noted is 'Ramakrishna, Sri, *Alla Ricerca di Dio*. Jean Herbert, ed. Roma: Ubaldini, 1963'. All subsequent quotations are, I presume, from this book. *Inevitable Grace* is itself translated from the Italian by David Kennard (Weelingborough: Crucible/The Aquarian Press; Los Angeles: Jeremy P Tarcher, Inc., 1990).

Visionary experience is the motif again which Richard Lannoy—his earlier work, *The Speaking Tree* (Oxford: 1971, 1999), remains a classic study of Indian culture and society—cites in his recent book: *Benaras: A World Within a World—The Microcosm of Kashi Yesterday and Today* (Varanasi: India Books, 2002). Interestingly enough, this also refers to the motif of death, which I noted earlier. Describing the Master's experience Lannoy says:

In the center of the complex is the temple of Tarakeshwar. When the Hindus die in the vicinity of Manikarnika, Taraka, a form of Shiva, is believed to whisper in his ear the Taraka *mantra*, which is of such power that it delivers him from all further rebirth. There is a story that the great Bengali saint, Ramakrishna, while on a boat passing Manikarnika ghat ... was carried at once into visionary trance. He saw Parvati fill a shell with nectar and hand it to Shiva, who bent down and poured it into the right ear of a dying man while whispering the Taraka *mantra*. (161)

In a comparable (but a more fascinatingly inward) study of Varanasi—*Banaras: City of Light* (Princeton: 1992)—Diana L Eck cites the same episode, but with a variation. In his vision, according to this version, 'The goddess Annapurna held in her lap the body of a dead man, while Shiva knelt to whisper the Taraka *mantra* in his ear. It is little wonder that death is said to lose its terror in Kashi for Shiva will be present and will speak into one's ear all one needs to know' (332). And it is Shiva who provides the link for our next contemplation on the radiant eternity. \*



## Reviews



*For review in PRABUDDHA BHARATA  
publishers need to send two copies of their latest publications.*

**In Search of Our Nationalist Roots for a Philosophy of Education.** Ramakrishna Mission Institute of Culture, Gol Park, Kolkata 700 029. E-mail: [rmic@vsnl.com](mailto:rmic@vsnl.com). 2004. 234 pp. Rs 50.

Our system of education usually comes in for much discussion, debate, dissent and deliberation—it is a topic which has temporality at all times. The colonizer's impact on the system is often decried and nostalgia for the ancient systems surfaces. Much blame for the flaws in our system is laid at the door of Macaulay, who may have made a monumental mistake in his intent of mass-producing clerks, but who did bring about some positive result by giving the 'window' of the English language to the Indian people, through which we continue to interact with each other—as the seminar, the papers presented at which form this volume, confirms. However, that is an old story when the present threat to establishing a more viable/meaningful system seems to come from the demands of MNCs and BPOs which insist on clones of a talking machine to serve as an extension of their telephones. But employment being the logical culmination of any exercise in education, however idealistically one relates the process to the acquisition of knowledge and wisdom, thinkers are constantly in search of that kind of scheme which actualizes the best of the inherent potential in the human species, honed by the process of an exceptional educational method.

The present volume is one such attempt at generating ideas on what our nationalistic ideals can do to make the system acquire efficacy at a point when some basic questions/doubts are being raised about the finished product which this education brings out. The volume is comprehensive in its sweep as it includes some of the major nationalist thinkers who have had a sizeable responsibility in formulating ideals about education and some of whom have also had the opportunity to implement these in concrete form. Consisting of nine scholarly presentations, the essays include the educational philosophy of

Vivekananda, Aurobindo, Tagore, Gandhi, J Krishnamurti, Acharya Prafulla Chandra Ray, and Satis Chandra Mukherjee.

Beginning with Swami Prabhanandaji's welcome address, where he mentions the 'need to consider the goals of education conceived in relation to society and the individual ... [and] the relevance of its contents as a set of principles and criteria' and continuing in the inaugural address of Prof. D P Chattopadhyay, who distinguishes between criteria like *shiksha* and *vidya*, the volume goes on to detail various philosophies of education propounded by the above-mentioned nationalists. The first two essays are on Swami Vivekananda's insights into education: one by Swami Muktidananda on the various processes that are actually carried out to make education according to Swamiji's ideals a means of complete holistic development in Ramakrishna Math and Mission institutions; and the other by Swami Atmapriyananda, entitled 'Swami Vivekananda's Educational Thoughts', which stresses the need for development of personality by making a scholarly thesis with relevant quotes, like this illuminating one from Sister Nivedita: 'Our conception of education must have a soul. It must form a unity. It must take note of the child as a whole, as heart as well as mind, will as well as mind and heart.'

These are followed by essays on the other thinkers: Prof. Ananda Reddy, Founder Director of Sri Aurobindo Centre for Advanced Research, Pondicherry, speaks about the evolution of consciousness as the cornerstone of Aurobindo's philosophy where education is a step towards supramental transformation. Prof. Sisir Kumar Das speaks about Tagore's conception of education and its concretizations in the form of Shantiniketan and Vishwa-Bharati and highlights the need for freedom: 'What Tagore decries is the paraphernalia of the teaching system, the complete divorce between the world around and the world of books and the total neglect of the sensibility of the child.'

The second part of the volume begins with Prof. Satindranath Chakravarti's essay entitled 'Gandhiji

on Education' in which, he says, 'Realism, idealism and pragmatism fuse into a unity.' Talking about 'Acharya Prafulla Chandra Ray's Ideas on Education and Nation-building' Prof. Sushil Kumar Mukherjee highlights the need to abolish futile exercises such as compulsory lectures and fixed courses, and suggests that we aim to make 'the universities ... storehouse[s] of intellect'. Prof. Haridas Mukherjee speaks about 'Satis Chandra Mukherjee and National Education', where he hails this educationist as an 'idealist and epoch-maker in politics ... and ... educational benefactor' who conceived of a national education thus: 'It was a three-dimensional system of education—literary combined with scientific and technical—on national lines and exclusively under national control, not in opposition to, but standing apart from, the existing systems of Primary, Secondary and University education.' Prof. K Krishna, Trustee of Krishnamurti Foundation, speaks of 'Education for Transformation of Consciousness', where he says: 'The test of right education today is whether it is producing good planetary citizens.'

These presentations are followed by an extensive section on discussions which is very interesting. Of course, there are certain points which need to be debated, like the mention of vernacular education, vocationalization and such others; but I am sure that a visionary of the stature of Prabhanandaji will surely think of extending the scope of a seminar like the present one by organizing a sequel to this 'search for the philosophy of education' in the form of 'Pragmatics of Education', which can take the form of a workshop rather than a seminar—and I for one would love to participate in it.

Dr Sumita Roy

Associate Professor, Department of English  
Osmania University, Hyderabad

**The Sterling Book of Buddha and His Teachings.** Kingsley Heendeniya. Sterling Publishers, A-59 Okhla Industrial Area, Phase II, New Delhi 110 020. E-mail: [ghai@nde.vsnl.net.in](mailto:ghai@nde.vsnl.net.in). 2004. 128 pp. Rs 99.

Dr Kingsley Heendeniya's book makes a very cogent and moving presentation of the ideas of the great ancient teacher Buddha. In the opening chapter Heendeniya states that his analysis and presentation of Buddha's ideas will depend on the writings and explication of the Pali canon of Buddhist texts provided by two English Buddhist monks,

Nyanavira Thera and Nyanamoli Thera, who jettisoned much in this canon that they felt were not the direct words of Buddha. Some of the most useful texts according to Nyanavira Thera are the *Vinaya-pitaka*, *Dhammapada*, *Suttavibhanga*, *Itivuttaka*, *Udana*, and *Thera-theri-gatha*. Heendeniya states that the Buddhist teaching or Dhamma departs after a certain stage from inferential thinking to 'intuition and insight', and that the teaching is *patisotagami* or 'against the stream' of conventional thinking (9). He also emphasizes that, for Buddha, language was important only insofar as it explicated ideas and not for itself, and that if he was interested in various phenomena, it was not for the sake of the phenomena, but for explicating his central concern: '*dukkha* and the cessation of *dukkha*' (10).

The most important section of the book is chapter four, entitled 'The Buddha's Concept of *Dukkha*', which offers the reader Buddha's definition of *dukkha* as 'the five aggregates of form, feeling, perception, determinations and consciousness affected by holding [*upadana*]' (34). Heendeniya explains that these become *dukkha* because they are related to the body. In other words, *dukkha* depends on the 'primordial ignorance' that 'this body is mine' (34). Buddha's antidote to *dukkha* is meditation.

In the chapter 'The Concept of Self in the Dhamma', the author points to the statement '*N'etam mama, n'esoham asmi, n'eso me attā*', meaning 'Not this is mine; not this am I; not this is my self', as the refrain that runs through the Buddhist Dhamma. It highlights Buddha's repeated assertion that 'form, feeling, perception, consciousness' are not the self and can never be the self. For the Buddhist arhat or seer, the ultimate moment of knowledge is *anatta*, which is perception of the not-self. However, as Heendeniya explains, this is not an easy moment to grasp either physically or mentally. At the moment of the arhat's understanding the not-self, there is no self involved. There is simply presence, a 'direct knowledge—without the intervention of a subject, without a reference point—totally absolute' (53). This I take, although the text doesn't make it absolutely clear, is what the lay person understands by the Buddhist concept of nirvana.

At the outset of this chapter, Heendeniya states that after the passing away of Buddha, it was the lack of clarity about *anatta* that led its brahmin critics to demolish it as a philosophical system. Following Nyanavira Thera, he explicates *anatta* by citing *Le Mythe de Sisphé (The Myth of Sisyphus)* by Albert

Camus: 'For if I try to grasp this self of which I am assured, if I try to define it and to sum it up, it is no more than a liquid that flows between my fingers. ... This same heart which is mine will ever remain for me undefinable. Between the certainty that I have of my existence, and the content that I strive to give this assurance, the gap will never be filled. Always shall I be a stranger to myself ...' (54).

This chapter closes with Heendeniya striving to show how Buddha, in not answering the ultimate question of Being, was in line with most modern philosophers like Nietzsche and Heidegger.

The text, while spelling out some of the central issues of Buddhist epistemology and ontology, reveals the contemporaneity of Buddhism, with the spirit of philosophical skepticism that is prevalent in the Western world today. However, the analyses of the impermanent nature of consciousness, feeling and perception, and the impermanence of all forms of life and action, indicate the value of Buddhism for dispassionate and serene conduct in the world of everyday matters.

*Dr Sreemati Mukherjee*

Head, Department of English  
Basanti Devi College, Kolkata

**The Healing Breath: Breathing Techniques for Better Health.** *Luis S R Vas.* New Age Books, A-44 Naraina Phase I, New Delhi 110 028. E-mail: *nab@vsnl.com*. 2004. v + 112 pp. Rs150.

Proper breathing is essential for our overall physical, mental, emotional and even spiritual health and well-being. Unfortunately, modern lifestyle is sometimes so hectic, stressful and demanding that one has little time to pay attention to such simple things. Air pollution, unhealthy eating and sleeping habits, lack of physical exercise and the like have an adverse impact on health. Neglect and ignorance of the importance of proper breathing only make things worse. *The Healing Breath* is a valuable book for such people as it describes the numerous benefits of simple breathing techniques which can be adopted to promote general health as well as prevent or cure various diseases. The breathing techniques have been discussed from the viewpoint of both medical science and traditional yoga.

The book begins with a discussion on the physiology of breathing describing the anatomical structures involved, the stages and types, and the process

of breathing. It explains the importance of the four stages of breathing—inhale, full pause, exhalation and empty pause—from the perspectives of yoga (pranayama) and medical science. The ill-effects of improper breathing on the body and mind are discussed. Brief explanations of the techniques and benefits of a few traditional yogic breathing exercises are given. The author explains the importance, benefits and techniques of deep, slow and rhythmic breathing in proper postures. While discussing the yogic breathing exercises such as nostril breathing, loud breathing, teeth-hissing breathing, tongue-hissing breathing, bellows, etc. the author has taken the precaution of mentioning the eight general principles to be followed in order to avoid the dangers of overdoing the exercises in anticipation of quick results. However, it is always advisable to do pranayama exercises under the guidance of a competent teacher. The chapter on 'corrective breathing therapy' with reference to respiration and voice production is quite informative. The positive effect of proper breathing on the mind is explained in the chapter on 'meditative breathing' and the author supports this with the results of research on the same subject at Harvard's mind/body clinic.

The book is an informative and instructive guide for anyone who is interested in improving his or her health through proper breathing techniques.

*Swami Tadananda*

Ramakrishna Math  
Belur, Howrah

## Books Received

**Beyond Shirdi.** *K Venkataraman.* Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, Kulapati Munshi Marg, Mumbai 400 007. E-mail: *brbhavan@bom7.vsnl.net.in*. 2004. xiv + 146 pp. Rs 135.

A collection of short stories based on incidents in the lives of devotees testifying to the perpetual presence of Sri Sai Baba of Shirdi.

**The Legendary Glory of Hanuman.** *Comp. and trans. Ajai Kumar Chhawchharia.* 36-A Rajghat Colony, Parikrama Marg, PO Ayodhya, Faizabad 224 123. 2004. iii + 87 pp. Rs 51.

A compilation of important scriptural texts pertaining to Mahavir Hanuman.



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# Reports

## New Math Centre

The **Vedanta Center of St Petersburg, Florida, USA**, has been made a branch centre of the Ramakrishna Math. Its address is: Vedanta Center of St Petersburg, 216 19th Avenue Southeast, St Petersburg, Florida 33705, USA



(Phone: 727-896-9840; E-mail: [florida@vedantasociety.net](mailto:florida@vedantasociety.net); Website: [www.ramakrishna.org/florida.htm](http://www.ramakrishna.org/florida.htm)). Swami Yuktatmananda has been appointed head of the centre.

## News from Branch Centres

Swami Smarananandaji Maharaj, General Secretary, Ramakrishna Math and Ramakrishna Mission, opened the newly built dispensary building at **Ramakrishna Mission Ashrama, Chapra**, on 1 April 2006.

Janab Ahmad Hassan, Uttar Pradesh Minister for Family Welfare, visited **Ramakrishna Mission Sevashrama, Lucknow**, on 6 April and inaugurated a seminar on 'Computer-navigated Surgery in Joint Replacement' at Vivekananda Polyclinic.

Swami Smarananandaji opened a new annexe to Shivananda Sadan (junior boys' hostel) at **Ramakrishna Mission Vidyapith, Purulia**, on 6 April. On the same day he also inaugurated a bathing ghat at the Vidyapith.

**Ramakrishna Mission Ashrama, Chandi-**

**garh**, observed its annual celebrations from 7 to 11 April. Eminent persons who addressed the public meetings held on the occasion included Dr A R Kidwai, Governor of Haryana, Gen. (Retd) Rodrigues, Governor of Punjab, Justice Smt. Ruma Pal, Judge, Supreme Court, Dr Aruna Goel, Head of the Department of Sanskrit, Panjab University, and Dr A C Julka, Head of the Department of Economics, Panjab University.

Sri H D Kumaraswamy, Chief Minister of Karnataka, and his cabinet colleagues visited **Ramakrishna Mission Ashrama, Belgaum**, on 8 April and distributed 50 tricycles and 25 wheelchairs to 75 physically challenged persons.

## Achievements

Master Siddhartha Kuila, a Class 11 student of **Ramakrishna Mission Vidyapith, Purulia**, won the gold medal at an all-India essay-writing competition on 'Wildlife and Environment' conducted by the Indian Centre for Wildlife and Environmental Studies.

Master Debanjan Basu, a Class 12 student of **Ramakrishna Mission Vidyapith, Deoghar**, was awarded the Krishi Vignan Pratibha Yojana Fellowship by the Satyendra Nath Bose Centre for Basic Sciences, Kolkata, an autonomous body under the Ministry of Science and Technology, Government of India.

Students from the schools run by **Ramakrishna Mission Ashrama, Cherrapunji**, secured the top seven positions in the 2005 upper primary school scholarship examination conducted by the Meghalaya Board of Secondary Education.

Sri Arjun Munda, Chief Minister of Jharkhand, visited **Ramakrishna Mission Ashrama, Ranchi**, on 11 April and attended the valedictory function of a paramedical-entrepreneurship training programme organized by the centre. He also presented 42 trainees with cer-

tificates, bicycles and health kits.

### Relief and Rehabilitation

**Ramakrishna Mission Sevashrama, Vrindaban**, distributed 125 packets of cooked food, 30 loaves of bread, 1,175 kg of foodstuffs (including rice, flour, dal, potatoes, onions, oil and salt), 200 bananas, 25 blankets, 75 saris, 25 chadars and 25 bars of soap to 25 families of Gantoli village near Govardhan in Mathura district whose houses were gutted by a fire.

**Ramakrishna Mission, Limbdi**, completed its project of dredging ponds in Rangpur, Sejakpur, Mulbhavala and Devpara villages of Surendranagar district.

### *Flood Rehabilitation in Maharashtra*

During the torrential rains of July-September 2005 many villages of Maharashtra located on the banks of the Godavari and the Krishna were flooded. Standing crops were ruined and people living in mud-brick houses were faced with the problem of collapses.

After short primary-relief missions, **Ramakrishna Math, Pune**, extended its work in Kolhapur, Sangli and Raigad districts by distributing food and clothing items. During their visits to the affected places, the monks and volunteers came across several villages which had proved too inaccessible to other government and non-government agencies.

After a thorough investigation, the Pune centre's relief team chose three villages—Pethmap, Ramoshiwadi and Kumbharwadi—in Chiplun taluk of Ratnagiri district that needed help most. In Pethmap, the Marathi Middle School was severely damaged: doors and windows had been torn apart and the furniture swept away, causing the only school serving Pethmap and the surrounding villages to stop functioning. Most of the economically back-

ward people of Ramoshiwadi and Kumbharwadi, who mainly worked as hired agricultural labourers, had lost their homes and were living in tents.



The centre appealed for funds from India and abroad and, with help from headquarters, started reconstruction of the school and building new houses for the victims. Under a 'Build Your Own House' scheme it provided required building material to the affected people and completed construction of 41 houses (work is in progress on 4 more), each covering an area of approximately 300 square feet in, record time. The school was rebuilt and furnished even earlier.

On 12 May 2006 Swami Gautamanandaji, President, Ramakrishna Math, Chennai, visited the newly built school in Pethmap. Later, in Kumbharwadi, monks of the Pune centre placed pictures of Sri Ramakrishna, Sri Sarada Devi and Swami Vivekananda and performed brief pujas in each house. Swami Gautamanandaji presided over a public function in Chiplun at which he handed over the keys to the families whose houses had been rebuilt.

For the monks and volunteers of Ramakrishna Math, Pune, the happy faces of the recipients and their blessings in the name of Sri Ramakrishna are mementos of the occasion. \*

### Correction

In Swami Chetananandaji's article 'Ramakrishna: His Name and the Science of Japa' (April 2006) Vijay Krishna Goswami was mentioned as the author of *Ritambara* (271). The author of *Ritambara* is Bijoykrishna Chattopadhyay.